OWARIMONOGATARI
END TALE PART 03
NISIOISIN
TRANSLATED BY
KO RANSOM

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VERTICAL.

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Art by VOFAN

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VERTICAL.

CHAPTER FIVE MAYOI HELL

CHAPTER SIX HITAGI RENDEZVOUS

CHAPTER SEVEN OGI DARK

OWARIMONOGATARI, PART 03

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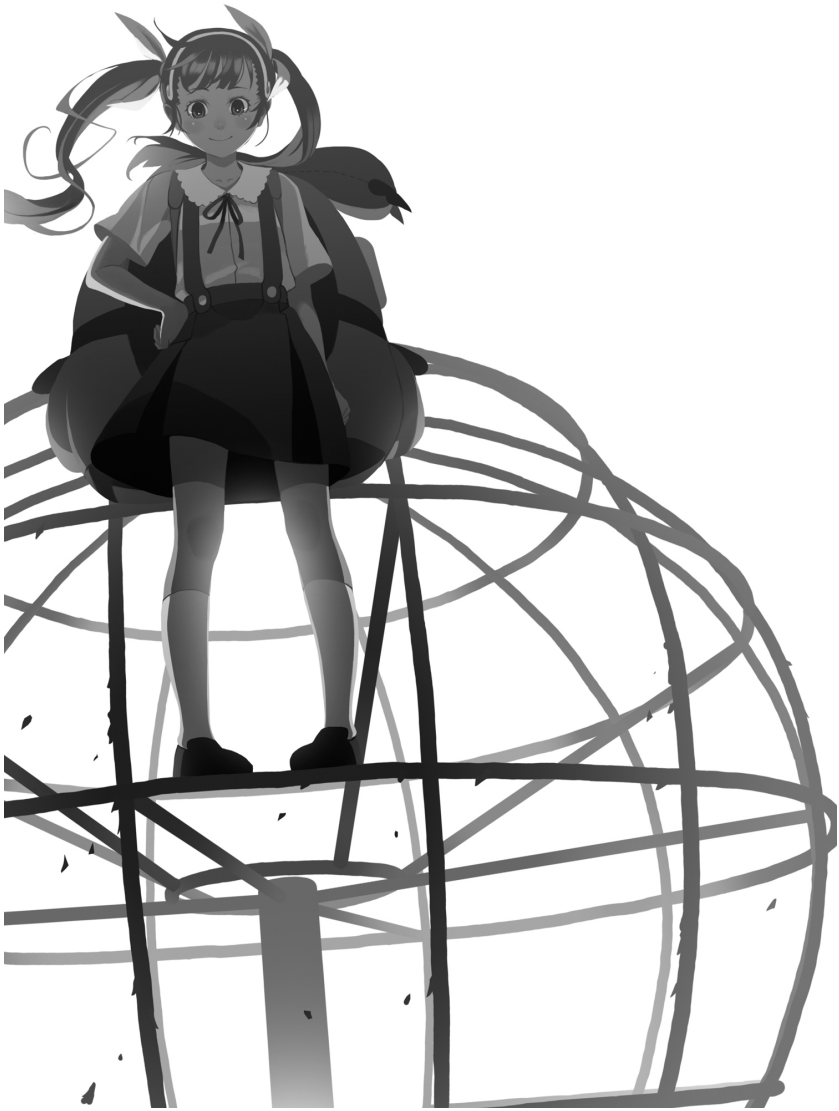
CHAPTER FIVE
MAYOI HELL

MAYOI HACHIKUJI



001

I wouldn't mind dying if it meant seeing Mayoi Hachikuji again. Is that dire sentiment unexpected? Actually, I'm not exaggerating. I really was prepared, at one point, to surrender my life and immortality just to see that cheerful girl again—so why didn't I? I guess as much as or even more than I didn't mind dying, I wanted to live, and thought I had something I needed to accomplish. My family and girlfriend, saviors and buddies are the premise of that feeling, so if you told me it's terribly improper and imprudent to subject feelings to addition, subtraction, or proportions, you'd be quite right, I'd be left with no room for argument, but you see, people—or at least I—don't have the kind of self-control to become a martyr to a single emotion. Despite my tunnel vision and brooding, I'm easily distracted. Quick to go back on my words and bend my convictions—trying to gain the whole world and losing everything, that's me, Koyomi Araragi.

Not making friends.

Because it'd lower my intensity as a human.

It's with nostalgia that I look back on that line of mine, so weak I've become as a human. So damn feeble—weakest of all, I don't hate how feeble I am, and even find it charming.

How soft, and weak.

Annoying, yes.

But that's me, I can proclaim.

That's Koyomi Araragi, I do declare.

Not without—shame.

But I can insist on it—embarrassing to say.

Perhaps you find my weakness unforgivable—not dying, and feebly living on, makes me an inexcusable sinner.

Despite the hell of spring break.

I'm still alive, and it's not as if I don't notice the murderous stares—a certain transfer student, for instance, who stares at me with jet-black eyes, might say…

"You really are a fool."

Yeah, really.

Only death can cure stupidity.

At the same time, maybe it isn't so grave an illness if all it takes is dying.

002

“Ha-Hachikuji?”

“Yes.”

“Hachikuji.”

“The very same.”

“Mayoi Hachikuji?”

“Hi□Mayoi Hachikuji, that’s me.”

“High Mayoi Hachikuji… Like a high elf to an elf? Are you some superior form of Hachikuji to the one I know?”

“Nope, just the regular Hachikuji. The common Mayoi Hachikuji you know well… High elf, in this day and age?”

“Mayoi Hachikuji Z?”

“No, I’m the unbranded Mayoi Hachikuji, I’m telling you. Nothing fancy, no pretension. Z? Well, since this is the final volume, I won’t shy from being compared to Z-Ton of the trillion-degree fireballs.”

“The most powerful monster in Ultraman? Shy from it, that’s way too venerable a Z… Who wouldn’t feel ashamed? Mayoi Hachikuji R.”

“If it stands for Returns, then um, sure, absolutely.”

“…”

…

No, hold on a second.

Stay calm.

No amateur calls—or rushing this.

Was there a single time in my life where rushing things turned out well? Hasn't it always ended horribly—premature celebrations followed by painful repercussions? Though I guess the painful repercussions came whether or not I rushed things (what kind of life is that?), you should always stay calm in the face of unexpected contingencies.

While it now seems like the distant past, spoken of only in legend, why not recall the time when Koyomi Araragi was called cool and handle this with steadfast composure?

You can do it.

That old self, bring him back.

Become me.

Yes, remember—what's my situation here, again? Even if it's going to be a sitcom, understand the situation before moving forward.

In other words, our usual the story thus far.

My name is Koyomi Araragi—not a nameless cat nor a weird bug who awoke in a futon, but a high school senior in a rural Japanese city.

Preparing to take entrance exams.

Yes, today, March thirteenth, was none other than exam day—hopefully a turning point in my life, after barely avoiding the cutoff score in the national admissions test and squeezing under the proverbial shutters as they fell.

Yet, considering who I was until not long ago, this itself is quite strange. Around this time last year, in March of my junior year, I never imagined I'd be trying to get into college. Actually, whether or not I'd be graduating at all was an earnest question.

Having entered Naoetsu High, a private prep school, thanks to a stroke of good or ill fortune, I fell behind and duly tumbled down what almost seemed like an established course, washing out and receiving one failing mark after the next—this was no mild slope but a double black diamond.

Or even a sheer drop.

A perfect instance of my not understanding a thing, as Sodachi Oikura might put it, but in any case, I thought that was where I'd made a wrong turn in life—how so careless. If I'd taken things as they came and moved on modestly, meekly, to a high school matching my academic level, you could say none of it would have ever happened.

What were my first and second years in high school like as these thoughts went through my head, you ask? I don't want to discuss the details, crucial opening flashback or not—please consult the previous volumes if you're curious.

I suppose what knocked me off my "washout" course, "the road to delinquency" according to a serious class president I know, were the events of precisely last March—I'm an accomplished lane weaver if I managed to drop out from dropping out.

Or maybe my car didn't have a steering wheel to begin with.

Right.

I met Tsubasa Hanekawa—a cat.

I met Shinobu Oshino—a vampire.

I met Hitagi Senjogahara—a crab.

I met Mayoi Hachijuji—a snail.

I met Suruga Kanbaru—a monkey.

I met Nadeko Sengoku—a snake.

And thus I, this me, the present me, accepted the yoke of studying

for college exams□became me. An ideal rehabilitation of a delinquent high schooler, come to think of it, and you might say a stunning success on the part of Hanekawa, who'd declared around the end of spring break or on the first day back: I'm gonna make sure you turn your life around.

Expect no less of a class president among class presidents.

The gods' own elect.

Of course, if you said the achievement belonged to Tsubasa Hanekawa alone, she'd be madder than anyone□Senjogahara's downright devoted ministrations dramatically improved my academics (ministration better describes her meticulous care, instruction falling short for at least the latter half of it), while Shinobu and my little sisters propped me up through those tough times.

I'm not so petty, nor is my vision so tunneled, that I'd overlook them□or so I'd claim. Okay, as far as Kanbaru goes, I feel like all she ever did was distract me…

Still, during Sengoku's case.

When Sengoku's second serpent case saw me fail□and make a disastrous blunder of massive proportions, I could fight on without my spirit breaking thanks entirely to the support of those around me. I can't let myself forget that.

In the end, I may not have done any good.

But because they stood by me.

I was spared, if nothing else, the irreversible error of dying□making me who I am today.

I am here, now.

Heading out to my exams on March thirteenth.

…Hm?

Hold on, I'm forgetting something important—if I don't recall this, it's as if I didn't remember anything. Yup, on the way to the campus of my first-choice school, which had accepted my girlfriend Hitagi Senjogahara via recommendation and sans exams, I took a detour.

Nothing out of the ordinary, just the commonplace one for me lately; I'd been climbing a mountain like it was part of my daily routine about every day since February.

I wasn't trying to get into hiking—my physique had undergone a literally inhuman metamorphosis, and I didn't need any exercise to keep my body in its already-healthy condition.

Putting that aside in an act of escapism, it wasn't hiking that brought me day after day to an empty shrine at the summit of a small mountain in town.

A forgotten shrine that meant something to us.

I headed to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—for a promised meeting. The wait was one-sided when I thought about it—I'd been stood up for nearly a month.

Right, that brings us to today.

March thirteenth—early in the morning.

While the person I waited for wasn't there, I faced the boss of the experts, Miss Izuko Gaen, who awaited me—

"…"

So now.

So now, why Hachikuji?

Miss Mayoi Hachikuji.

Try as I might to remember, no connection whatsoever to my current situation came to mind—the plot of the story thus far had a hole. I was meeting with Miss Gaen, so why Hachikuji all of a sudden?

I looked once more at the young girl before me.

I stared her at length.

A girl with a well-balanced pair of pigtails and a mature height for a fifth grader—her backpack so large it still seemed out of place—gazed at me with wide eyes and an innocuous smile.

No mistaking it.

No way to mistake it.

Up, down, left, right, however I looked at her, it was Mayoi Hachikuji.

The lost girl I met in that park last year on May fourteenth—with the exception of Tsubasa Hanekawa, there was nobody I was less likely to mistake for someone else.

I'm not exaggerating, even if Hachikuji had an identical twin or were a clone, I was confident I'd know.

"Ha ha ha. In other words, Mister Araragi, you could even find me in the opening of the anime's first season? Quite the Where's Wally."

"…"

Even this meta remark could only be Mayoi Hachikuji—but in that case, if so.

"Phew."

Geez, what a predicament.

Given this twist, I'm sure everyone expects Koyomi Araragi, reunited with his beloved Hachikuji not just for the first time in a while but after what seemed like a final parting, to jump for joy, sob tears of gratitude, shake with emotion, blabber confusedly and bustle triumphantly, and most of all, move in to hug her.

I'm sure that's what they expect.

Sigh, such weighty expectations.

My shoulders are gonna get dislodged.

Don't get me wrong, I get it.

I get them.

I freely admit, I can see it their way.

I'm hardly new to this industry, and I'd like to think, as a midcareer guy, that I get the drift of things□understandings, codes, that stuff. Don't get the wrong idea, but that said, I'm a high school senior now, who's about to graduate too□I'm not going to be moved to my core over every little development, you know?

I accept it, just like that, a total stranger to the kind of emotional instability that makes excessive use of "!" or "?!" or dashes as in "□□□□□□!"

In light novels of yore, this might be a scene featuring a huge font or bold text or something, but this is the twenty-first century, okay, and being somewhat precocious, I feel like I'm already living the twenty-second, the era of Doraemon and not Astro Boy.

Emotions? I've tucked them away in a fourth-dimensional pocket.

So if I were to go ahead and express my mood…

"Oh, it's Hachikuji."

That'd be it.

That and only that.

Maybe I'm cold, but facts are facts□whatever people are going to think of me, I just can't lie. Please, really, don't get the wrong idea though, it's not like I wasn't happy.

I never suggested that, did I.

Of course I was happy.

Yes, happy.

We were friends after all. If nothing more.

Yup, we did share some pleasant memories.

Like, erm, the time we had soft drinks together?

Vague as my recollection is.

Did she use to mangle my name?

I heard about that somewhere.

Bland exchanges, I must say now that I'm an adult, but fine, I enjoyed them to some degree at the time.

Seriously, when friends and acquaintances you parted ways with thinking you'd never meet them again—former friends and acquaintances as far as you're concerned—appear out of nowhere, how are you even supposed to react?

As a general, obvious rule.

Orthodoxly speaking, just orthodoxly.

I haven't ever transferred schools so this isn't firsthand, but don't those kids talk about how awkward it felt, say, when their transfer got postponed after a farewell party? Maybe this was similar.

Like in the final chapter of a kids' comic where the protagonist has to move and tells everyone, "So I guess this is it," only to move just one house over, their wacky adventures will continue or something?

Comic books get away with it, but you'd be flummoxed if it happened in real life. Where do you put those feelings when you've packed them up?

Or maybe it's like being left with an extra cardboard box after cleaning up a room—or putting a mechanical pencil back together and finding a piece still sitting there.

Where in your heart do you store it?

Those analogies capture how I felt.

Hachikuji, huh…

Wait, was that her name—Hachikuji?

I wasn't so sure about the first syllable there, and I couldn't trust my memory, not entirely—Mayoi, or Koyoi—on the issue of her given name. We'll say Mayoi Hachikuji for now—still.

They say when you attend an elementary school reunion as an adult and meet old friends, their impression can be so different that you go, What the heck. This might be a little different, but I dunno, it's more or less how I felt.

It was nobody's fault. You simply grow up.

I'd matured.

I guess the extraordinary emotional growth I'd experienced since that summer and our parting made a new man out of me who's nothing like my former self.

Right, that's how it shook out.

This disconnect, or discomfort, my stiff and halting demeanor upon our reunion, was simply inevitable.

Unavoidable in a creature that grows—the human being. People change, cannot help but change.

Wouldn't it be creepy, in fact, if they stayed the same?

That carefree me, who took off like a rocket to tackle Hachikuji whenever I saw her in town, was no more. That guileless me—no more… To be honest, I don't understand why I did any of that, or what was so fun about it.

Spotting a girl, then dashing off to hug her?

A plain criminal!

Hard to believe I was once that person, but in a sense, that person just isn't me anymore—not Koyomi Araragi.

If that was Koyomi Araragi, then he died. He, if not God, is dead. The Koyomi Araragi who was better off dead in fact is. Rightly dead.

As for the reborn Koyomi Araragi, who faced a ten-year-old Mayoi Hachikuji, who hadn't grown the least bit since those days—a certain sense of disappointment visited me along with the joy of our reunion, I must admit.

Expecting an equal level of growth from her was absurd, certainly, but not maturing even a little in the half-year since our parting?

Demanding the same gusto of me despite this truth made no sense.

If I was supposed to engage in banter here as we used to, how could I hide my anxiety that we'd even hit it off, now that my vocabulary was inclined toward philosophy and ethics? I wasn't sure I could stoop properly to her jejune sensibilities.

Because stoop as I might, my mind, or spirit, had proceeded to such a sophisticated stage that the most vulgar topic I could think of to discuss was politics.

What level should I be aiming for?

The tragedy of mastery, so to speak—I was stumped as to what passed for general knowledge and common sense in our times.

Well, having said that.

Right, having said that (thank you for your patience).

According to my few tenuous strands of memories, Hachikuji had indeed done much—without her, without having met her, I wouldn't be me today, so I couldn't be callous with her.

Humanity, justice, courtesy, wisdom, fidelity, devotion, obedience.

Debts of gratitude must be repaid, and it's only natural to thank people who've aided you□it wouldn't do to say I didn't have a clue. Koyomi Araragi, now a mature individual, was obliged to match her level as best he could.

In that case, how felicitous.

As a rite.

As an initiation, as if I've returned to infancy, yes, like an uncle playing with his niece, I would repeat the act once more, one last time, with paternal generosity.

One last time, I mean it.

I had low expectations and desired nothing, but perhaps I'd discover something new in the process□um, how did this go again?

I only had a faint idea now, but no doubt I'd remember as I did it□not that it'd matter one bit if I didn't.

Yeah, let's just do it live.

Why practice?

On your marks. Phew, ready…

!! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?!

"Hachikuji□□□□□!"

!! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?! !! ?!

I leapt toward her.

Leapt with a big, bold font.

Scattering countless exclamation points and question marks and throwing in some dashes.

"Eeeek!"

"Hachikujiii! Hachikujiii! Hachikujiii!"

“Eeeek! Eeeek!”

“What’re you doing here, what’d I do to deserve this?! No, forget why, you being here is enough for me, I can’t even put it into words, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

“Eeeek! Eeeek! Eeeek!”

Hachikuji thrashed about.

I clung to her tight, moved to tears.

“Oh, the way you feel in my hands, the way you feel in my arms, the way you’re just the right size to hold tight, it’s the Hachikuji I know! Thank heaven! The more I rub my cheeks against yours, the more I know that it’s you, Hachikuji! The more I lick you from head to toe, the more I know that it’s you, Hachikuji! You can take a licking and keep on ticking, can’t you, Hachikuji! These eyeballs, these lips, this nape, these collarbones, these breasts, these upper arms, these ribs, these thighs, these knee pits, these ankles! The way they feel, the way they taste, so Mayoi Hachikuji! How smooth you are, as if your every nook and cranny has been waxed down! I’m never letting you go, you’re staying and won’t get away, I’ll keep on hugging you like this until I breathe my last! Imprisoned here, in my arms, for the rest of your days! Damn our bodies for getting in the way of our embrace! If we were both fluids, we could mix to our hearts’ content! It’s been so hard since we parted ways, I couldn’t take it anymore! Let me vent, let me vent, heal me! C’mon, lemme touch you more hold you more lick you more!!”

“Eeeek! Eeeek! Eeeek! Eeeek!”

“Hey, stay still! You’re making it harder for us to strip naked!”

“Eeeek! …Graaah!”

She bit me.

As hard as a child could.

“Eeeek!”

It was my turn to scream—my arms came undone from the pain, all too soon after I'd sworn never to let her go, but now it was Hachikuji's teeth, lodged into my palm, that wouldn't let go.

Wouldn't let go? More like they were tearing through my skin!

Had she grown fangs or what?!

"Graaah! Graaah graaah graaah graaah graaah!"

"Ow ow ow ow ow! What're you doing, you stupid brat?!"

Yeah—the ow.

The what're you doing should have been her line.

In any case, leaving out all the details, for the first time in about six months—

My buddy Mayoi Hachikuji and I were impossibly reunited.

003

“All right…so, what’s going on here?”

“Don’t try to change the subject, Mister Pervert.”

“Mister Pervert? Really, Hachikuji? How’s that a slip of the tongue? It neither rhymes, nor has the right number of syllables. Has it been too long? Or did your inexhaustible vocabulary finally run dry?”

“My tongue didn’t slip at all. It might not rhyme or have the same number of syllables, but you’re Mister Pervert himself. Mister Araragi and Mister Pervert are identical.”

“Heh. As harsh as ever, I see.”

“You can’t wrap all of that up with a cool line. Nothing’s wrapped up here, look at my clothes.”

Persistent!

I thought we ignored the previous chapter once we were in a new one? Ghost or not, she needed to follow the rules.

Yeah, hadn’t breaking them mired her in a world of trouble□wasn’t a quip I could make jokingly.

“Jokingly doesn’t cut it, we have a case here. This is going to end up in court. Show some maturity for real, Mister Araragi. What do you think you’re doing in the final volume’s opening pages?”

“Oh, shut up. If you think a final volume has to start off melancholic, then you’re badly mistaken.”

Just not my style□a policy statement from Koyomi Araragi. We’ll laugh and laugh until the bitter end.

“You’re hopeless, Mister Araragi. Well…I guess it’s very you. Wears me down, though.”

Hachikuji shrugged and nodded.

She understood me.

And schooled me on how to wrap things up with a cool line.

It hadn’t been too long, then—but now that we’re in a new chapter, honestly, while I was elated to be reunited with her, logic be damned, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have any questions at all.

Logic has its own importance.

Why was Mayoi Hachikuji here?

Having passed on from the world and ascended to the next—what brought her to the grounds of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine? That was August twenty-third, and it was now March thirteenth, so—having said her final goodbyes to me six months and twenty-one days ago, to be exact, why was she back here?

To repeat, I was glad.

A bliss so supreme I almost didn’t care—but coming back after all this time to tell me she hadn’t passed on wasn’t the sort of weirdness that I, for one, could accept.

How do I put it? Perhaps Miss Gaen, who’d given me advice back then, had taken some measure to safeguard Hachikuji—that’s the kind of theory I could put together on the spot, but Mèmè Oshino, who acted like he saw through it all, was the expert who’d do something like that, while Miss Gaen seemed the least likely to resort to such plots and means.

She did scheme a lot, so it wouldn’t be strange if she’d done something behind the scenes when Hachikuji passed on, given later developments—but I didn’t see her as the type to plan such a surprise.

She was strict, or maybe realistic—looking back on him now, Oshino

was something of a romantic, if a frivolous one, and operated in a somewhat different manner from Miss Gaen despite being her junior in college.

Which meant…what exactly?

I had to interpret this as the late Hachikuji returning to our world—yet, for all the various aberrations I'd encountered over the past year, I couldn't say on the spot if returning to our world after passing to the next was normal for them.

I mean, isn't it called passing on because you can't return? Because it's irreversible? But a priest who's renounced worldly pleasures can return to a secular life, and the Obon festival is all about welcoming back your ancestors… Even Senjogahara visited her father's hometown during Obon, didn't she?

True, Obon is in August, not March, but maybe my exam prep fell short and there's some annual event that takes place at this time of year.

So, was this okay?

Being reunited with Hachikuji like this?

This happy and convenient a turn—taking place in my life?

"…"

"Deep in thought, huh, Mister Araragi? I can only imagine…but while you were going berserk, you did mention that things have been tough for you since we said goodbye. Maybe you're having trouble trusting other human beings at the tender age of eighteen as a result."

Of course, I'm a ghost and aberration and no human, Hachikuji noted.

Hm. Her remark implied that she hadn't revived—though the feel of her skin just now made me think she might have.

Dead people don't come back to life, that piece of common sense

still worked—I regained at least some degree of composure because right then, even that fact seemed to be standing on thin ice.

But wait.

Wait a sec—think back and remember.

I had to be forgetting a lot of things. It felt like I'd recalled various stuff but they weren't linking up; there was still a big disconnect between meeting up with Miss Gaen and being reunited with Hachikuji.

Miss Gaen safeguarding Hachikuji might be a delusional flight of fancy, but that lady must have had some sort of hand in this.

"Terrible, Mister Araragi. The pub dates have gotten a little spread out, but totally forgetting something like that being done to you is living your life a little too gracefully, don't you think?"

"…"

Leaving the meta comment aside…

If the current situation was Miss Gaen's doing, I couldn't just celebrate seeing Hachikuji again—as much as I wanted to, alas, I had to do more than that.

I had to make sense of this.

I looked up at the sky—where the sun climbed high.

Dazzled somewhat by its blazing rays—I realized I wouldn't make it to my exams in time, at the very least.

Late…was an understatement.

I didn't have to check my watch to know that I'd forfeited my seat—not tardy, but absent. What a royal waste of the grueling days I'd spent with Hanekawa and Senjogahara.

I felt drained, or maybe despondent…

Like I'd really messed this one up.

I didn't make it all the way to despair because, to be honest, some part of me wasn't surprised.

Yup.

Since saying goodbye to Hachikuji I'd been through far too much.

Enough to have trust issues not just with humans, but everything.

Enough to believe nothing.

Maybe my heart had gone numb to pain and to sorrow.

I guess it was still open to joy but who knew for how much longer, if my pain poisoning continued.

Poisoned.

"You know… That's right. Ever since you went away, Shinobu's first thrall showed up, Oikura came back, all of that stuff happened with Sengoku at this shrine, I met Kaiki, I turned into a vampire all on my own, and I let Ononoki kill one of her parents… Right, I guess that happened at this shrine too. And it was also here that Miss Kagenui went missing. It's been one awful thing after the next… I've been panicking this whole time, and sure, some good things did happen, but not the kind of half-year you could expect to come out the other side of as a more mature person. I've taken nothing but steps back, in fact. I've been describing those two weeks of spring break as hell, but you know, the real hell might have been these last six months."

And it all started when I lost Hachikuji my life had fallen into ruin like a home had lost its guardian spirit. I don't want to sound like I'm asking for more than my due, but if I was going to meet her again, I wish I'd been a version of me that could do so proudly.

In a different kind of situation.

As a different kind of me.

“You’re wrong, Mister Araragi.”

Then.

Hachikuji spoke.

“Wrong Mister Araragi.”

“Hm… Uhh, about what?”

“Mister All-too-lucky.”

“A six-month hiatus might mean a six-month backlog of tongue slips, but I was talking about how incredibly unlucky I’ve been, so of all the ways your tongue might slip, why in such a merry and happy way? Mister Unlucky, at the very least. Also, my name is Araragi.”

“I’m sorry. A slip of the tongue.”

“No, you did it on purpose…”

“A quip from the stung.”

“Or maybe not?!”

“A chip of the lip of the strip of the flip of the hip of the blip of the drip of the grip of the quip of the rip.”

“You can say that without your tongue slipping?! I’ve heard of speaking in tongues, but that beats it!”

“I’m not trying to become a voice actress just for show.”

“That was never part of your character, was it, now. Don’t add things this late into the game.”

“You’re wrong, Mister Araragi,” Hachikuji repeated.

Please just accept that it takes us a bit of time to get our conversations started.

“You’re wrong.”

“Wrong… About what? I got something wrong?”

Well, probably a lot of things.

Though not about wanting to be a different me if I was going to see her again.

“Oh, that’s not where you’re wrong, it’s not about your feelings or anything sentimental—but something more real, or maybe material… Simply put, you’re wrong about our location.”

“Our location? What do you mean—”

“You keep on saying this shrine, but this isn’t Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, Mister Araragi.”

“What?”

Hearing this, I looked around.

Now that she mentioned it—I’d only been looking at Hachikuji and the sun, but now that she mentioned it.

We weren’t at Kita-Shirahebi, or at the summit of a mountain.

This—was where Mayoi Hachikuji and I first met.

The plaza of that one park.

“Huh? Wait, huh?”

How could I not panic at this point?

Encountering Hachikuji was entirely impossible on its own, but I’d also moved without realizing it—and teleporting from Kita-Shirahebi Shrine to this park made me lose my calm.

All the cool-headedness I’d been working to regain.

Gone.

“Wh-What? How did I wake up in a totally different place? Hm? Did someone carry me here while I was asleep?”

Hachikuji? No, she couldn't have.

I'm hardly on the larger side, but I'm not so petite that an elementary schooler could carry me somewhere by herself.

From here, Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, to there, the park□no, the other way around, from there, Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, to here, the park□a pretty significant distance. Hachikuji couldn't carry me that far.

But if not Hachikuji…then Miss Gaen?

No, her doing that kind of physical labor? I guess that left Ononoki, working under her orders, as the only candidate?

She had the physical strength, no question.

Still, why?

"Why would Ononoki carry me to Namishiro Park?"

"You're also wrong about that, Mister Araragi."

"Huh? I must be wrong about all kinds of things… So, she didn't carry me? I suppose not…"

"Correct, it wasn't Miss Ononoki. Also, this isn't Namishiro Park."

"Oh, right. I still don't know how to read the name of this park… Huh? Hold on, Hachikuji. Do you actually know the correct reading? If it's not Namishiro, then what is it? Rohaku?"

"It isn't Rohaku Park either."

"?"

Neither Namishiro nor Rohaku?

Those seemed like the only options. How else would you read it?

The name of the park…no, that wasn't important.

"Wrong again□it's very important. To begin with, Mister Araragi, while it might look identical, which is to say it's been recreated

here, strictly speaking this isn't the park where we first met."

"Huh?"

My confusion only grew.

What was the truth here?

Actually, being at the mercy of Hachikuji's statements was nothing new, but this was a little excessive—what was she trying to say?

If not that park, where were we?

What exactly was going on?

"Please calm down and listen, Mister Araragi," Hachikuji stated—almost like an able doctor telling her patient about an intractable disease he'd developed. "There seems to be a chance, or rather, it's clear you believe that I, after passing on to the next world, have returned to appear before you. But in truth, in reality, that's not so."

"What?"

"I haven't appeared before you—you appeared before me."

"Whaaat?"

"I'll be blunt. I was hoping you'd remember—but Mister Araragi, early in the morning on March thirteenth, you visited Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, where you met Miss Izuko Gaen."

And got killed.

Mayoi Hachikuji announced—the truth.

Her words made me remember.

On the grounds of the shrine—on the path to its sanctum.

Miss Gaen cut me into pieces—killed me.

The solution is for you to die, she had said. Everything will be

solved if you die—everything will come to an end.

And with that, she sliced me up using the enchanted blade Kokorowatari.

The Aberration Slayer's very own.

I wasn't sure how Miss Gaen had come by the greatsword of a legendary vampire—or to go further back, the first thrall of a legendary vampire, but in any case.

Miss Gaen killed me.

Without mercy.

She slaughtered Koyomi Araragi.

And if this was the result—hm?

Wait, if I was here as a result—was I killed only to come back to life? Did I revive and appear before Hachikuji in the process?

Then I'd need to ask where she'd been—but no, that'd be the park, however you read its name.

"You've gotten so close, Mister Araragi. It'd be great for you to go all the way, but if the last volume is a little too thick, it'll seem like we're having trouble letting go. Let me wrap this up due to space concerns."

"Way too late to be saying that when there's already been a Part 1 and Part 2… I'd appreciate it, though. It's not like I'm invested in coming to an answer on my own."

"What an attitude in a student about to sit for his exams."

"Quickly abandoning problems you can't solve is an important part of being a good test-taker."

"Sounds like you're more interested in preparing for tests than studying for them. How lacking in ambition. Of course, they're assessing high schoolers in new ways now that they're abolishing

the national entrance exam.”

“Don’t turn this into a discussion about testing. How ’bout you pick a different topic, like the situation I’m in right now.”

“Fine, I’ll stop picking at your wounds. You said trouble befell you since we parted ways. Knowing that you’re only in for more pain at our reunion makes me feel so bad, I can’t bear to look at you. If you’ve been visited by one tragedy after the next, and these past six months, not spring break, was the true hell for you, I feel terrible about piling onto that.”

“Hold on, your preface is scaring me…”

“I should hope so.”

Because this Hachikuji said.

Mister Araragi, she said.

“Is hell.”

“Excuse me?”

“The deepest hell among all this is Avīci.”

004

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

I screamed.

A shriek from the bottom of my heart.

“Hell?! Hell?! Avīci?!”

“Correct. The hell known as Avīci. Not Raurava, so would you be so kind as to stop yelling? You’re being noisy.”

“What, no! How could I not scream?! I feel like I’m in Maharaurava right now!”

“Again, you’re in Avīci. You don’t want to be criticized for misinforming people.”

“Fine, but it’s not helping me get it together!”

Hell? And Avīci, the deepest of them all?

A quick aside for some hell trivia (source: Tsubasa Hanekawa).

According to one school of thought, there are eight great hells, and the deeper you go, the crueler it gets. From top to bottom, these are 1: Sañjīva, the hell of revival, 2: Kālasūtra, the hell of black threads,

3: Sa ghāta, the hell of crushing, 4: Raurava, the hell of screams, 5: Mahāraurava, the hell of great screams, 6: Tapana, the hell of heating, 7: Pratāpana, the hell of great heating, and 8: Avīci, hell without interruption for a total of eight great hells.

There are also eight cold hells, but I'm going to omit those they say that Avīci, the deepest hell, involves more suffering than hells 1 through 7 combined, a true inferno.

Of all the sinners who fall into hell, only the worst make it all the way down. A top private institution among hells.

That is Avīci.

"And wait! I might not have led the most praiseworthy or extolled life and never saw myself as the kind of character who'd make it into heaven, but the lowest circle? No way! What did I do?! If it has to be hell, just let it be Sañjīva or so! How's this realistic?!"

"I'd say 'realistic' went poof the moment we started talking about hell."

She sounded upbeat.

Like she enjoyed my confusion what a nasty personality. Well, they do say that seeing someone in the grip of panic sometimes make you more objective…

"We might be at the end here, Hachikuji, but this is absurd. Hell? Really? The world we live in has stuff like hell and the afterlife?"

"It'd be absurd not to assume there's a hell in a world with

aberrations."

"…"

Shinobu once said something of that nature.

Time travel should be possible if aberrations exist□fine, hell was more plausible than warping through time.

But something about heaven and hell made them sound more fantastic than the occult. Maybe thanks to Japan's unique sense of religion, where all kinds of beliefs are muddled together…

"It's not uncommon," Hachikuji said. "Like characters not believing in fortune-telling when they're in a realm where magic is real. And this might be more of a balance issue in world building, but who'd eat meat in a world with talking animals?"

"I see what you're trying to say…but I'm still going to have trouble believing you if I'm told that I'm in hell. I mean…"

"You do stress out over the details, don't you? You need to take a more relaxed approach."

Sure, but…

You need to take a relaxed approach and accept being in hell?

"What you need to do is adapt to the situation and not shamelessly flail around in dismay. Be like a character in Izumi Kawahara's laid-back manga."

"Spare me your specific examples."

"What, are you a life-after-death denialist? After all those extravagant deaths of yours?"

"Well…"

True. Come to think of it, I couldn't be denying the idea of an afterlife when I recognized the existence of ghosts like Hachikuji and zombies like Ononoki.

Should I say a tacit understanding?

To be precise, regarding vampires, it seems more like they continue to live without dying rather than revive. You could explain that without the afterlife if you wanted…

“But,” I said, “it’d really shake things up if death isn’t the end…”

“Shake things up? How?”

“Well, take the meaning of life… It’d be nothing more than a warm-up. If there’s an afterlife, whether that’s heaven or hell, living with any kind of urgency seems a little pointless… It affects the austerity of life and death.”

“Who cares if it isn’t as austere? Or are you a fan of books where the author’s all, Trust me, I know how tough the world can be. Heh. That’s why I’m writing this book. Heh.”

“…”

What kind of book was that?

And what kind of description was that?

“Oh, you know the kind. People die left and right, the most terrible things happen to girls, you feel awful for the children, truly evil villains show up, and the world is cruel and unfair type thing.”

“I get it, but ‘type thing’? You’re being so spiteful that I don’t feel like arguing with you…”

“That was an academic classification, right?”

“No.”

“I’m just saying, authors ought to depict sweet ideals, not the bitter truth. What’s wrong about dreaming?”

“Said like an Izumi Kawahara fan.”

“It’s not too late□can we aim for that worldview too?”

“How?!”

It’s way too late!

Not when there’s only one book left!

And even if we had a hundred!

No matter how we hard we tried, we’d never arrive at that clean of a world!

“The line separating clean from not: whether a young girl like me is described as a sprite or as Lolita.”

“That’s where the line is?”

“We ought to build up from there. They’re only going to get less permissive.”

“Doesn’t matter, this is the last volume. And anyway, let’s examine this bit about me being in hell. Can we dig deeper here?”

“Tragically, Mister Araragi, there’s nowhere deeper than this.”

Right…

The lowest layer of hell, its deepest Avīci.

“Actually, it’s more ironic than tragic,” I noted. “Araragi, Avīci… The first letters use the same character! I never even imagined it was foreshadowed from the very start. From birth, I mean.”

“I do think that’s a bit of a stretch…”

“They say that Avīci is covered in flames as far as the eye can see, so maybe my little sisters being called the Fire Sisters was foreshadowing too!”

Hm? But this park wasn’t covered in flames or anything and according to Hachikuji, it had been recreated here.

Why recreate the park in Avīci? What was the background there?

No, the question was more basic. If this was Avīci I had one big question.

“A big question? Oh, you want to know why you’ve been sent this deep into hell. Um, you can figure that one out with a little thought.”

“A little thought…”

Hm.

I needed to consult a few more entries in the dictionary that was Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Though Avīci is where those who committed the gravest sins are sent, what exactly were those again? Killing your parents or something?

I’ve been a pretty bad son, becoming a washout since entering high school and all, but I never killed my parents, or even thought about killing them…

“No, not that. You turned into a vampire, didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

“You saved a vampire and despite many other sins worth mentioning, that’s the main one that brought you here. Of course you’re going to hell for saving a demon.”

Just like Taro Urashima was brought to the Dragon Palace at the bottom of the sea after saving a turtle Hachikuji said, but that didn’t sound like my situation at all. It didn’t work as an example.

“This is completely off topic, but wouldn’t it be interesting if we had a gender-swapped version of Urashima, a ‘Hanako Urashima’? Then you’d get a handsome Dragon King in the fable.”

“Don’t take us off topic,” I complained. “And Dragon King? Sounds tough.”

Oh. So because I turned into a vampire…

I did remember now. Slaying a holy man was another way to end up in Avīci—even if I didn't kill them myself, I was indirectly involved in the deaths of Guillotine Cutter and Tadatsuru Teori, so maybe being sent this far down was justified in its own way.

Not that I wanted to think so…

"Agh. Whatever the reason, getting sent to hell is super depressing. It's like a total negation of everything I've done…"

"My condolences. I'm very sorry for your loss."

"…"

Well, putting aside feeling depressed.

My big question didn't have to do with any grave sin—we could put me aside.

It was Hachikuji.

The girl in front of me with whom I'd been reunited. Mayoi Hachikuji.

Sprite or Lolita aside, too—why was she here?

Wait, what?

No, really! Why was she here?!

"Why am I here?" Hachikuji had seemed to enjoy my confusion, but now she looked a little stuck, or maybe just stuck-up, at becoming the subject. "Well, you know. Because I was sent to hell."

Nonetheless, she hadn't so much as paused.

Like there was nothing serious about it.

But it didn't get more serious. Because I was sent to hell. What a joke!

"Right? Ha ha!"

“That’s not what I meant!”

“I was foreshadowing earlier when I brought up Z-Ton and his trillion-degree fireballs.”

“If anything is a stretch, it’s that! Whaaat?! You’ve gotta be kidding me! Seriously, you got sent down here after passing on in that moving of a way? What a waste! What are you even doing? How’s that possible?!”

“Calling it impossible won’t change the fact that I’ve been sent here. You’re reacting as if a senior of yours who wanted to become a musician, and whom everyone loved to the point of giving him a send-off party, greets you as a hard-working businessman ten years later. Don’t make his greeting stiff and awkward, okay?”

“That’s a perfectly likely scenario compared to you being sent to hell! And what kind of business is this? What a career change, it’s too steep a fall! Your selling point was your innocence and purity, and you’re in hell? Did you commit some awful sin I don’t know of when you were still alive?”

The eleven years she spent wandering the streets as a lost child shouldn’t count—that was after she died, and you’re only sent to hell based on the life you’ve lived.

How does a ten-year-old girl commit a sin so grave that she ends up in hell? No—but you’d be surprised by how minor, or rather, nonsensical the reason can be.

That tidbit is courtesy of Tsubasa Hanekawa too, of course.

“Well, it’s technically a grave sin,” Hachikuji tried to soothe me, “though I didn’t know either until I ended up here. A child is sent to hell, no questions asked, if she dies before her parents.”

“Oh…”

The ultimate act of disobedience.

Right, dying before your parents gets you sent to the Sanzu River, where you pile up stones to atone for your sin.

On Mother's Day, Hachikuji left her dad's home, alone, to meet her mom—and got run over and died before she arrived at her destination.

Whatever Mayoi Hachikuji's mother and father were up to now, they were alive at the time, eleven years ago. In other words, the daughter died before both her parents.

And so.

She was sent to hell—fell here.

"You've gotta be kidding me…"

That was all I could say.

I understood the reason but couldn't agree with the reasoning—how could I?

Society once saw children dying before their parents as an act of disobedience, and maybe some people still think so, but that mentality ignores how regretful the child must feel.

It wasn't as though Hachikuji wanted to die first—damning her to an afterlife of piling up stones was too severe a punishment…and even if she'd sinned, wouldn't her death be punishment enough—

"…"

"Hm? What's the matter, Mister Araragi?"

"Well, I was shaking with indignation over the absurdity of it… Yet my tragic fate as a master detective forced me to notice that something isn't quite right."

"How are you a master detective? Even when you seem to be solving mysteries, it's always someone else doing the actual solving for you."

Wow, harsh.

But true.

“So, what did you notice?”

“I already expressed my doubts when I heard that you were sent to hell after our moving farewell. Even if I were to back off by a trillion degree□of deduction and not temperature□I still don’t see how you committed a sin grave enough to end up here with me. You’re supposed to be stacking up rocks in children’s limbo, no?”

I didn’t know much about the topic, but straining my memory to its fullest to conjure up relevant bits from Hanekawa, that seemed to be the case. Children’s limbo, Sai-no-Kawara, was the riverbed of the Sanzu, a kind of entrance to hell.

There, children had to build stone towers for their parents; each time, a demon□not a vampire, but an oni□came to knock it down. A harsh sentence for children, yes, but Jizo Bosatsu, the Bodhisattva of deceased children, would eventually come to rescue them. A hell with a bailout mechanism, so to speak.

A hell on the mild side.

As gentle as a slap on the wrist compared to the cruelty of Sañjīva, where you spent an eternity suffering, slain by demons only to be revived again.

Perhaps not severe enough for the vampire Koyomi Araragi, who’d experienced dying and coming back to life plenty of times during his battles on earth□be that as it may, why was Mayoi Hachikuji in Avīci, for the lesser sin of dying before her parents?

“A very astute observation, Mister Araragi. Let alone a master detective, you’re the reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes.”

“Except I’m dead.”

Not to mention, it wasn’t that sharp.

Anyone would wonder□Tsubasa Hanekawa, the source of all my info, probably would have the moment she faced Hachikuji.

Not that Hanekawa would ever end up in hell, no matter what kinds of mistakes she made□but who knows? Hachikuji and I were here,

no questions asked, so given all the trouble she got up to as Black Hanekawa, maybe the class president among class presidents didn't have a guaranteed ticket to heaven.

"Unless this Avīci stuff is just a mean joke on your part, and we're both in children's limbo for dying before our parents." Sure, it did seem to be a park, not a riverbed, but I wasn't seeing spires of flame, either.

"Stop trying to inch your way into a better situation every chance you get. Avīci is the hell you deserve to be in."

"When you're that emphatic about it, my downfall feels like it was a foregone conclusion…"

Tell me it wasn't.

How sad, if that's the series finale after nineteen volumes.

"Yes, Mister Araragi. That's right," Hachikuji doubled down. "I knew you'd land all the way down here□knew it in advance. It was a given. Which is why I left the riverbed where I belong and came here to receive you."

"To□receive me?"

"Yes. Like a welcoming ceremony. I wish I were waiting with a garland of flowers like in Hawaii. It was too much of a pain so I didn't bother."

"What a great attitude."

Not that I'd know how to respond if I were welcomed to hell that way. Presented with a garland of spider lilies, the flower of death, should I smile?

"I told them I needed to take the day off from stacking up stones because a friend of mine was here, then took off."

"It's that relaxed in children's limbo?!"

"Well, with all the people undergoing near-death experiences just

dropping by, parts of the river are kind of like a tourist destination lately."

"Bullshit."

"I'm tight with the demons there. I get a free pass, they don't block me. Call it a killer pass."

"Could you not use your hell jokes on me? I haven't figured out the sense of humor down here just yet."

Not that I could tell where her joke started or ended□but I was intrigued that she knew in advance.

Of course, she couldn't have waited for me if she didn't before the fact… Before the fact?

"Yes," Hachikuji said. "It's not like I foresaw it□but I knew."

"You knew?"

"Yes. The fact that Miss Gaen would kill you, and that you'd end up here□I knew."

"You…knew…"

"Not me□the person who told me knew."

Everything, Hachikuji said, as if drawing on a memory.

Apparently, this person knows everything.

005

“Now that we’re done giving detailed explanations about every last mystery, may we depart? Time to go, Mister Araragi.”

“What? Where to…”

She hadn’t explained every last mystery at all, and the explanations were so quick and rough that honestly, most of our conversation had been nothing more than small talk!

Someone needed to set up an explanation center.

“Oh, I can give you the details as we walk. We can’t just sit around in this park talking forever—no need to sit in place the entire time, this isn’t an anime commentary track. I’m originally a child, you know, and staying still goes against my nature.”

“Hm… Willing as ever to cross over into any media you feel like. But yeah, I don’t care where we discuss this.”

“Didn’t we use to talk on the road for the most part? You did lose both of your bicycles, but why not trek side by side with me for a change?”

For a change, or the first time in a while—that wasn’t what I objected to. Of course we could talk as we walked, I was fine with it if she was…but where were we headed?

“Well, it seems you’re a little out of position, so I’m correcting that and putting you back in it. Such is the role I’ve been assigned.”

“Your role?”

“Heheh, call it another ironic twist of fate. I, whose former calling was to make people lose their way, am working as a guide.”

I didn't take her meaning as she walked off, her large backpack swaying. If this was hell, or at least the afterlife (I couldn't let it go, thanks to my attachment to life or refusal to accept the situation), the girl before me had brought her favorite backpack down here.

I wasn't complaining, though, I didn't want to see her in a death shroud or anything—I was wearing my school uniform, too.

No trace of having been shredded.

Nor was my body sliced into ribbons—maybe only because I was in a hell where dying just meant reviving, and not because I was a vampire benefiting from the associated traits…

If I got a new set of clothes every time I died, hell was hard at work.

"Hm, but now that I mention it, Shinobu isn't with me. If I died, does that mean she actually regained her full vampiric nature?"

"Most likely. I think that was another one of her goals."

"Her?"

Repeating the word, I followed Hachikuji out of the park. Sidewalk, roadside trees, street, crossing, signal—I still saw the same town as always.

Not that I knew the area well enough to say so—but nothing seemed strange about it as a town.

Nothing about it was hellish.

If you pressed me—I guess it felt strange that there were no other pedestrians?

"At the entrance to Avīci, didn't people have to fall through flames for two thousand years? All the sinners are busy falling, and maybe that's why no one's arrived yet?"

Of course not.

I was here.

And couldn't have fallen faster than them, according to Newton's experiments.

"Yes, and you'll understand that part soon enough—I'll make sure you do. Don't worry, think of me as all-knowing and all-powerful. I've heard about most things from her."

"Again—who's this you're talking about?"

"Her august self."

"Yikes, what is she, the final boss?"

"Her Excellency."

"Why the period-drama affect? Who is this person—who knows everything?"

Well, I already knew by now.

If it wasn't Hanekawa, that left only one possibility—it had to be the big boss of the experts and the one who cut me into ribbons, Izuko Gaen.

But how did Miss Gaen contact Hachikuji, who'd ascended to the afterlife—or rather fallen into the depths of hell?

"An all-knowing, all-powerful ass in lion's skin, that's me."

"Nah, you can't bluff your way up that far. You do seem to know where we're going, Hachikuji, so start by telling me our destination. Your mother's place—couldn't be it."

"Right, and she appears to be alive and well. Her house was gone, but she'd simply moved. Thank goodness."

"…"

"Well, in terms of destinations, Mister Araragi, here's our designated goal: my job is to bring you back to life."

Putting you back in position was a figure of speech, I guess it's

more like dislodging you from the correct position, Hachikuji added, just complicating things.

I didn't get it at all.

Then again, I hadn't understood much of anything lately—led to and fro by everyone, getting caught up in their affairs… I bet a slicker guy than me would have fared better.

"Bring me back to life… Wait, is that something I can do?"

"Of course. You're not just going to stay dead, are you?"

"But Miss Gaen…"

The solution is for you to die—she had said.

And since this was her, I believed it. Naturally I wasn't happy with it, and it made no sense, but whatever she was thinking, I could be certain of one thing. She acted in ways that, in her view, brought the greatest possible happiness to the greatest number of people—even if nothing could be less in my interest.

You could trust her on that.

Nor would she second-guess her own actions—if she thought killing me was the solution, she'd never take it back.

"Really, Mister Araragi, keep it together. It had to be this person's plan all along. To kill you, then have you come back to life."

"Kill me, then have me come back to life…"

All along?

What an unproductive plan.

That went beyond taking credit for solving a problem you created, it was like multiplying by two and then dividing by two—giving me a scare was all it accomplished.

Did she want to prove that hell existed?

Why now?

Even if that was it, she'd have known about it for a long time now—hm?

Did Hachikuji just say this person?

Rather than she?

…

Now I was splitting hairs.

"It isn't just multiplying by two and then dividing by two," Hachikuji continued, not engaging with my inner doubts—walking did seem to suit her better, and she was getting pretty talkative. "Subtraction's at play as well."

"Subtraction?"

"That, too, you'll understand soon enough."

"…"

Every crucial bit was being held back… As my guide, I guess Hachikuji had a proper procedure in mind, so I wasn't going to force the answers out of her.

The idea of coming back to life hardly left me cold, but I was letting a torrent of topics toss me about, entrusting myself to the flow, and not thinking clearly, focusing too much on Hachikuji—I don't know, the unvarnished truth is that words as potent as come back to life weren't ringing a bell for me.

"Is something the matter, Mister Araragi? Aren't you happy? You can return to being alive."

"Um, honestly, my brain hasn't gotten to that point. I'm having a hard time accepting that I'm dead, so I'm not in a place to wonder about not being dead…"

"Ha ha ha. Are we rehashing that discussion? Would a world where

the dead come back alter the meaning of life?”

“That’s not it.”

Was it?

Nope, that wasn’t it.

No, some part of me must have felt, I can rest in peace now. Though it did sound like a line out of a manga…

“Hm. I can sympathize. You’ve been battling, with your life on the line□they say gamblers who keep on winning actually have a subconscious desire to lose. Perhaps to bring balance to a life that’s seen too much victory? I wouldn’t mind believing that your relief was genuine and not affected.”

“Why so condescending□”

“However, I doubt she is so generous that honesty suffices□this way,” Hachikuji turned a corner.

As she did, the scene changed□well, the corner was a regular corner. I mean the color of the sky.

It should have been midday.

But the sky snapped to night□the streetlamps, just standing there until a moment ago, illuminated the darkened street as if they’d been doing so for some time.

“What? Did someone just cast Tick-Tock?”

“I wonder□oh, Mister Araragi. It appears as though someone’s collapsed over there.”

“Hm?”

Just as I was coping with the color shift in the heavens (we were supposed to be in hell, after all), Hachikuji spoke and pointed□looking in the direction of her finger, I saw why. Certainly, leaning against the streetlamp, lit as if in spotlight, was a person.

No, not certainly. Uncertainly.

And not a person, but a monster.

Collapsed there□covered in blood, in a pool of blood, was a vampire on the verge of death, her limbs severed.

A legendary vampire in a gruesome state.

The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire□Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

006

“Shi-Shinobu!”

I ran to her side—no thought needed on my part. Rushed over as soon as I saw it. With neither the time nor the composure to consider why she was here, why our meeting during spring break was being recreated in hell—I just ran to her side.

What did I plan to do, I wonder? In retrospect.

In any case, in any event, I ran to her—and had no idea what to do next. Was I in my right mind?

Didn’t I feel bitter regret for those past actions? I couldn’t have forgotten—unthinkingly rescuing her then, lured in by her beauty, and about the tragedy that befell me as a result.

But all I could do was rush over—or more accurately, I tried to.

Our eyes met.

Or so it seemed, but that moment, a smile even more gruesome than her state spread across Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade’s face—as she disappeared.

Vanished.

When she did—the darkness lifted as well, the sky that suddenly shifted suddenly shifting back. The foreboding night street seemingly arranged for her returned to being a plain, run-of-the-mill road.

“…”

A hallucination? An illusion? A mirage?

Doubtful—who needed them in hell?

Let alone the ghost of a vampire.

Had Miss Gaen gone on to use the enchanted blade Kokorowatari on Shinobu to put her in such a state? Except, true vampires wouldn't end up in hell. Maybe as a demon tormenting the damned, but…

What was that, then?

What did I just see?

"Did your body just move on its own, Mister Araragi?"

Hachikuji jogged over to catch up to me.

She didn't look too surprised by the strange occurrence—as if she'd foreseen it.

Foreseen it.

Or rather, she knew?

She'd been—told?

"Strange. You so regretted how you saved Miss Shinobu over spring break. Why do the exact same thing in an identical situation?"

"Because…well, um, my body moved on its own?" Although Hachikuji wasn't being openly critical, my reply sounded like an excuse. "R-Rushing over doesn't necessarily mean I'd save her like during spring break. Who knows, maybe I was trying to finish her off?"

"Even a child can see through that lie. Please don't forget that we're in hell. Around here, you get your tongue plucked out for lying," Hachikuji warned mischievously as she passed me—to lead me once more. I followed, flustered.

"Well, even if I wasn't going to finish her off…" Perhaps doing so meant helping that suicidal vampire noble—but even if I wasn't

going to. “I do wonder what would’ve happened if I’d ignored Shinobu…if I’d run scared from a beautiful, blood-soaked woman. I see it play out in my dreams.”

I never expected to see it play out in hell, though.

No chance in hell—but it was exactly where I chanced upon her.

“Come to think of it, by that point, Shinobu’s first thrall had gathered as ash in my town—so who knows, maybe that armored warrior would have arisen to save his master as the three vampire hunters moved to kill her. Shinobu and the First, reunited for the first time in four hundred years…who parted ways with their relationship still in ruins, might have reconciled.”

“That’s what I’d call too good to be true.”

“Yeah. And getting in the way of it—is an unbearable thought.”

“This-a-way.”

Hachikuji simply kept walking, and it was hard to tell if she’d heard my, shall we say, griping—not much of a guide given the origins of her character. Of course, I’d waddle along like a spot-billed duckling if it meant being brought back to life, but how could I get my bearings if she wasn’t going to be a bit kinder as she led the way?

As proof of her ill-suitedness, she’d taken me through town and strayed into a nearly impossible location—a Naoetsu High building.

How do you proceed from a sidewalk straight into a school hallway? And wait—something was clearly strange.

This was more than being lost.

Sure, it was already strange the moment day flipped into night, but…

“So, Mister Araragi, the school where you take your classes—well, technically, a recreation. Even having wandered all over that town, this campus is like holy ground. Being at a high school is a first for

me. Would the teachers get mad if they found me?”

“The trouble will be all mine if they see me walking around with a ten year old… My exams will be the least of my worries then.”

I’d be looking at a battery of investigations, not examinations.

Heaven forbid.

That said, I wasn’t running into any sinners or persecutors in this Avīci, so teachers seemed even less likely… But an abandoned hell?

Had the system changed? Was Avīci now a hell of solitary confinement? Regularly awful, but Hachikuji greeting me turned it into more of a paradise…

My perse-cute-or?

“But why was the street connected to a school hallway? I don’t see the street we were on behind us, either. Just the usual school building…”

“Well, it’s not a road unless it leads everywhere.”

“Hm… But□”

“Oh, Mister Araragi. A perv. Be careful.”

“A perv? Uh oh, Hachikuji. Quick, hide inside my clothes, that’s to say behind me.”

“I’m not sure that was a rephrasing.”

We hastily slipped into a nearby classroom to avoid encountering this perv whom Hachikuji had spotted, but it was none other than me ambling in a school building I’d assumed was empty.

Koyomi Araragi.

A handsome youth, not any pervert.

Hachikuji had mistaken me for someone else.

Thinking that silly thought, I saw, walking next to me, another individual—Tsubasa Hanekawa.

First-gen, too. Tsubasa Hanekawa with glasses and braided hair.

Just one braid, as first-gen as you could get—single-braided Hanekawa and I walking side by side at Naoetsu High never took place in reality, as far as I knew.

She wore her hair in two braids after spring break, then stopped wearing glasses and cut her hair short. What's more, it was a tiger-striped, black-and-white pattern now—but there was no mistaking her.

…And wait, hold on a sec.

Was that how smiley Koyomi Araragi looked talking to Tsubasa Hanekawa? I wanted to say I'd been striking a more manly look, but no.

They left my sight as I thought this—maybe they were headed to a classroom for a president-vice president meeting. To discuss the culture festival or something.

"Sure, you led a tumultuous life after you rescued Miss Shinobu—but coming to know Miss Hanekawa just before that was also significant. She's had a massive influence on you. What do you think about that?" Hachikuji asked abruptly.

The question came so unannounced that I couldn't process it for a moment. Excuse me? Are you saying—I'd be better off if I hadn't gotten to know Hanekawa?

"In hindsight, she made a mess of the situation with Miss Shinobu, didn't she? And quite terrible things happened to you over the course of your two encounters with Miss Black Hanekawa."

"…"

"If you'd never become friends with her, you wouldn't have been dragged into that long string of troubles—no one could blame you for feeling that way."

“Well, I won’t deny that she’s to blame for a lot. The girl who doesn’t know everything, just what she knows, revealed so many truths that could’ve stayed hidden, and forgot so many truths that could’ve stayed remembered, sending me through reckless shortcuts and down impossible detours—but.”

The question was liable to send me off into a fit of rage if anyone other than Hachikuji asked it, but since this was her, I could answer in a strangely serene, matter-of-fact way.

I wasn’t sent anywhere. Persisting in the here and now, I answered—

“I’m still genuinely glad that I became friends with her.”

“…”

“I’m beginning to get a vague idea about this walking side by side… So, what, do we need to follow them?”

“Hmm. There’s no strict route, but sure, this way please. It’s like Alice in Wonderland and I’m your White Rabbit.”

“Wonderland, huh…”

For now, it did feel more like a wonderland than hell—not that I could say, with my shaky recollection of the original.

Hachikuji called it a recreation.

The park—and this Naoetsu High.

A recreation and vicarious experience.

From spring break to here—I followed Hachikuji out of the classroom, but Koyomi Araragi and Tsubasa Hanekawa were nowhere to be seen.

If we were going after them, we needed to go upstairs. Whatever the meeting was about, they were heading to our third-year class—I thought, and looked toward the staircase.

Then.

I saw a girl frozen in midair posed like she was flying, but sure enough, there in stop motion was my girlfriend whom I knew so well.

“Senjogahara…”

“You could’ve not tried to catch her after she slipped the choice wasn’t as dire as saving a beautiful woman collapsed on the street, dying. Catching a falling person is just plain dangerous too depending on how, the faller could get injured in addition to yourself. Miss Senjogahara weighed barely anything at the time, so I doubt she’d have suffered if you’d let her be. You know, the way small, light animals and bugs can fall from high places and somehow be fine.”

“…”

“But you, Mister Araragi.”

“If Senjogahara fell towards me? I’d catch her every time.”

She’d told me.

That she was glad it was me who’d caught her and I felt the same way.

I was glad to be the one to catch her only by chance, just by coincidence, but aren’t those chance coincidences also called fate?

Duty, even?

“Hypothetically,” Hachikuji said, climbing the stairs and glancing to the side, at Senjogahara, as she fell or was in a bizarre state of motionless falling. As though the words meant nothing in particular. “If you hadn’t caught Miss Senjogahara she might’ve suffered minor injuries, but I doubt anything serious would have happened. She’d have continued to live her scornful life of defiant pride. That conman would come to this town a little later, correct?”

“You mean Deishu Kaiki.”

“Yes, a man with fateful ties to her. Perhaps they would have their

destined showdown. As things stand, you prevented it during summer break…but I wonder, what might have happened if you hadn't gotten in the way, if her boyfriend hadn't butted in?"

"What would have happened?"

"Might they have gotten back together?"

Miss Senjogahara seems to be hiding it, but even you must have figured out that they once had something between them, Hachikuji said.

I followed after her and passed by Senjogahara.

Though motionless, her position was so precarious that I felt like grabbing and planting her down, but who knew. I might throw her off balance the moment I touched her…

"Their old flame may have been reignited then□life, love, it's all too much to know how to handle," commented Hachikuji.

"You, talking about love? Who's going to take you seriously?"

"Oh? You're interested in hearing my romantic history? Do you have any idea how precocious elementary schoolers are these days?"

"I don't want to know… About your romantic history, even less."

"What do you say, Mister Araragi? To the idea that you interfered with Miss Senjogahara's romance with the conman?"

"What do I have to say? What else but hah, serves you right."

The situation with Kaiki was a little different from the one with the First.

Not that I could discuss it with Senjogahara…

"I'll admit, Kaiki helped me out with Sengoku…but that's separate. Completely separate. I can honestly say I wish I'd never met him."

“Ah. True, there are people like that in your life—you can’t get along with every last person. Well, why don’t we end by going over the name you just brought up, Miss Sengoku. Let’s bon voyage.”

“Let’s bon voyage… I get what you’re trying to say, but where do I even begin—hm? Wait, what about Kanbaru?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, Kanbaru. Suruga Kanbaru.”

I’d convinced myself that the packed itinerary starting from a park and heading to who-knows-where was a sort of hellish trial—my soul resting on a scale against opposing evidence.

Or maybe feathers, not evidence (source: Tsubasa Hanekawa).

I thought we’d be looking back at all of my conduct since spring break, or all that happened to me, everything that assaulted me since, in a kind of pilgrimage.

Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade during spring break, Tsubasa Hanekawa during Golden Week, Hitagi Senjogahara after the holidays…

I could understand skipping over Hachikuji since she was with me, but chronologically, Suruga Kanbaru came before Nadeko Sengoku.

This hell was silent for the time being because my sins were still being judged, and I wasn’t undergoing the fiery torments that filled Avīci because my punishment was pending, or my case was ongoing—so went my arbitrary interpretation.

If it was correct, I’d fall through flames for two thousand years after this pilgrimage, so if it wasn’t, I’d be totally fine with that…

“Oh, yes. Miss Kanbaru. She’s a special case.”

“A special case?”

“We’re passing over her, or skipping her turn—her case is slightly different from everyone else’s.”

“It is?”

Wasn’t that truer of Nadeko Sengoku, the individual she proposed we visit next?

Kanbaru and her aberrant left arm were on the standard side as far as aberrations go…

“Oh, no, this isn’t about aberrational phenomena, Mister Araragi. The issue is their relationship to you and in Miss Kanbaru’s case, you couldn’t help but get involved.”

“…What does that mean?”

“Miss Kanbaru, with her characteristic assertiveness, decided to stalk you and acted on her own initiative to kill you. You could be faced with that situation a thousand times, and your option would still be limited to taking appropriate measures.”

Hachikuji sounded appalled, as if to say, or could you have sat there and let her kill you?

Hm, she had a point.

Even if stalking or coming to kill me didn’t neatly summarize her behavior, minor initial choices in relationships with stronger communicators like Kanbaru, who come straight at you, probably don’t make any difference down the line.

She held the reins.

Naturally, she wouldn’t have stalked me if I hadn’t started dating Senjogahara and since I’d vowed to catch my girlfriend no matter how many times she slipped, you could say some sort of relationship with Kanbaru was as unavoidable as family ties.

In that sense, I understood ending with Sengoku no point in visiting Karen or Tsukihi.

Even so, skipping Kanbaru after all that brouhaha was somehow hard to accept it’s not the exact same, but it felt like excluding an important friend without meaning to.

“Still, Miss Kanbaru’s personality is unique in the Araragi harem. In fact, it’s baffling that you get along so well. What could ever connect you, with your isolationist policy when it comes to people, and Miss Kanbaru, a human tax heaven?”

“Tax heaven…”

Paradise, huh?

At her core, though, Kanbaru isn’t that much of a natural optimist—she has her own baggage. She carries it around with her.

Otherwise—why would she have wished upon a monkey?

“She had a unique upbringing too,” I remarked.

“Did she?”

“Yeah. Didn’t I tell you? Her parents eloped—and when they did…”

Kanbaru was raised as neither a Kanbaru nor a Gaen as a young child—she didn’t know what family was, in the extended sense. Hence her estrangement from Miss Gaen, who was technically her aunt.

Miss Gaen had made no effort to reveal her identity even as she’d roped her older sister’s daughter into her work last August.

“Hmm, how distressing. To have all of Miss Kanbaru’s mental and physical strength, and not have life go the way you want—makes me wonder just how many people out there live as they wish.”

“Who knows… Too heavy for a high schooler when we let it get that big. I’m sure everyone’s stressed, though, to some degree.”

Of course, that sentiment wasn’t free of a desire akin to jealousy—wanting the winners to experience their fair share of suffering.

Still, how do you sympathize with: Oh noes, I need to earn another ten billion yen but this isn’t working. So cruel! I’m getting stressed out!

“Well, aren’t your own tribulations pretty luxurious too? Not all kids studying for college exams get the kind of fortunate, or exceptional, treatment that you enjoyed.”

“You’re right. I’ve got nothing to say in return.”

“You can think about that once you’ve returned to life, though. You’ll have plenty of time.”

Hachikuji twirled around on the landing, then continued up to the next floor—or so I thought, but suddenly the stairs weren’t Naoetsu High’s, but rather…

On a steep mountain, surrounded by nature—steps I’d been climbing more often than those at school lately.

The long path snaking up toward Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

This felt more like warping around than teleporting—as if space itself was twisted. The scene change wasn’t traditional fantasy, but all-out phantasmagoric, but it no longer felt unusual to me.

I’d grown numb, or rather, acclimatized.

Acclimatizing to hell is a strange notion, I admit—but I did cross paths with Nadeko Sengoku on these stairs in June… If this wasn’t some cosmic trial of my soul, my life was flashing before my eyes in my final moments after Miss Gaen cut me down.

Maybe I was just looking back—with regret.

…Yup.

Whether it was Shinobu, Hanekawa, or Senjogahara, not to mention Hachikuji, I’d take the same actions no matter how many times I found myself in the same situation—but I couldn’t deny that maybe I could’ve done better.

“You did quite well, Mister Araragi. At least when it comes to me.”

“That’s comforting, thanks—but as far as Sengoku goes, I failed.”

“You did. And how humiliating that your archnemesis, that conman of all people, cleaned up after you.”

“Yeah, and so□”

So.

I continued to climb the stairs as I spoke□and sure enough, or as guaranteed in advance, Sengoku came walking down from the summit, as I thought she would.

Her hat pulled down deep to her eyes□a petite middle school girl wearing a fanny pack. With brisk steps, she hurried down the mountain as if running away□and in fact, that must have been her state of mind.

Run away.

She must have wanted to.

Of course, when I crossed paths with Nadeko Sengoku on the mountain□in reality, not in this recreation□I didn’t recognize her.

Nor was I able to sense her pain.

If there’s anything I wish I could’ve done better with Sengoku, that might be it…

“I wonder. I think the standard you’re setting for yourself is a little too high. It’s not as if you’re omnipotent. Be more modest, like Miss Hanekawa.”

“If I were as capable as her, I could afford to be ever humble□a guy like me is stuck wanting more.”

“Miss Sengoku had a strained relationship with a friend back then, correct?”

“Yeah, that’s what I heard. Even if that conman’s bulk-sold ‘charms’ were at the root of it.”

No…his charms were a minor detail. The roots ran deeper□

“Well,” I continued, “if you can call someone who’d put a snake curse on you a friend. I forget who said it, maybe Oshino? That’s why I don’t make friends.”

“Quite the opinion itself Miss Sengoku’s case may have ended in failure, but don’t elementary and middle school troubles usually turn into fond memories once you’re an adult?”

“Dunno about that. I feel like nothing turns into an adult’s baggage more than childhood memories. Maybe it’s because I’m not an adult yet, but at least…my memories of not being better for Oikura back in elementary and middle school are nothing but painful.”

“Miss Oikura.”

“Oh… Right, Oikura started coming to school after we went our separate ways. You haven’t heard? From ‘her’?”

“Well, to some extent, but I never met Miss Oikura. I can’t say I have a full understanding of the situation based on a game of telephone.”

I just know the things that I know, Hachikuji said coolly. A line that would have landed if someone like Hanekawa had said it regrettably, it just sounded pretentious coming from Hachikuji.

A game of telephone, though…

Would that be her wording if she’d heard it straight from Miss Gaen? I felt like it implied there was someone else in the chain. Was I reading too much between the lines?

“Actually, your home environment is rather unique too. I did hear about that. Your parents took in and sheltered misfortunate children, so you spent a good amount of time with them as an elementary schooler, et cetera. Perhaps that environment fostered the Fire Sisters’ sense of justice, as well as your own.”

“You know, I’m starting to think that maybe Sengoku played that kind of role in Tsukihi’s life. I’m not saying there were any issues in Sengoku’s family environment…”

“I don’t know if any family is free of issues. Only they know about their home—I should let you know that any independent body would be creeped out by you and your little sisters.”

“Could you not run an independent audit of my life? How about ‘from an objective viewpoint’?”

As we shared this exchange, Sengoku passed all the way by us—but showed no signs of noticing us. It was of course a recreation, so maybe she couldn’t see us—I forget, did she notice me when we crossed paths in reality? Even if she had, she wouldn’t have said anything to me, given the situation. Especially since I was with Kanbaru…

In any case.

Not saying anything to Sengoku—made this another repeat of my actions. Later (the next day?), I’d see her in a bookstore, chase after her, then…

“Well, I might have failed with her, but I can’t think of any better way I could’ve gone about it. Even if I was never directly harmed, it was an emergency.”

“Yes, it was. If people could redo their lives from the start, maybe they’d just rehash their behavior again and again. With luck, I thought we might hop onto the time-loop-story bandwagon that’s all the rage.”

“I think that already passed.”

“Booms are cyclical. If anything is a loop, that is. They do say that history repeats itself.”

“We’ve been talking about me this whole time, but what about you? In your case—if you could redo your life, where would you start?”

“Hard for me to say. I won’t deny that I used to want to mend my parents’ relationship. But when I think about it, I’m not sure how right it would be to reconcile two people who’re on bad terms. Breaking up on a whim is sad, but so is making up on a whim.”

“I don’t think you could build any relationship if you saw things that way…”

“As their daughter, I want to complain to them that they shouldn’t have gotten married in the first place if they were going to get divorced, but then, I wouldn’t exist—I admit that’s an extreme example.”

“…”

“I guess you can only go to war with the army you have. What about you, Mister Araragi. You fought with everything you had in the moment and the circumstance—so maybe even in hindsight, you’d just keep on doing the same thing if events looped over and over.”

Even if you didn’t do the optimal thing every time, you surely did your best, she said.

“And…as far as Miss Sengoku’s case goes, I do think that outside interference played a significant role. Blowback—might we say?”

“What? Outside interference? Blowback?”

“Right. You’re unable to grasp that part well. Don’t worry about it much, then. I’m only saying that extreme actions cause reactions.”

“Hold on a second,” I began to ask, curious. “Why are we still climbing this mountain? You said Sengoku was our last stop, and we’ve crossed paths with her. Shouldn’t that bring this walking side by side to an end? Haven’t we reached our mecca?”

“Oh, no. Didn’t I tell you? The goal of Mayoi Hachikuji’s Massive Hell-Cruise is to bring you back to life. We can’t stop here—if anything, we were on a detour.”

“A detour.”

“We were lost, if you prefer.”

“…”

“Don’t worry. This is like a ceremony we need to carry out—initiation might be the better word.”

“Bringing me back to life… I thought that was something you could only do with Yumewatari, the companion blade to Kokorowatari… Am I wrong?”

Kokorowatari, the enchanted blade Miss Gaen used to slice me up.

A blade that kills only aberrations, once wielded by an expert at slaying them—a blade to cut aberrations which should not, must not exist.

Paired with it was another enchanted blade, Yumewatari.

The Aberration Savior, though that’s a bit of a stretch.

A second enchanted blade with the power to resurrect an aberration slain by Kokorowatari—was how Shinobu described it to me.

If Miss Gaen’s scheme, the intent behind her uncharacteristic savagery, was to bring me back to life after killing me—I assumed the Aberration Savior was the only way.

My read didn’t address the all-important question: how would she swing a blade that was supposedly engulfed by the Darkness four hundred years ago? Hm, did someone say something about that?

My memory was just so unclear…

“No, you’re right. But that’s a ceremony for the world of the living—hell has its own way of doing things.”

“You’re making this sound pretty cool…”

We were just on a walk.

We were taking a stroll together, that was it.

Walking with Hachikuji brought back such good memories that it was like walking on clouds, another world—I guess it was, since we were in hell.

This hardly felt like being in hell, though.

“It’s fine, don’t worry, Mister Araragi. There’s no trial to best or barrier to overcome in order for you to come back to life. Nor any classic trick, like not being allowed to look back. Your resurrection is a guaranteed certainty, so relax and just get ready to go out there.”

“…”

“Hm. Is something the matter? You look dissatisfied.”

“Dissatisfied?”

More like gloomy.

Well, dissatisfied wasn’t wrong—I felt that way too.

Because my dim, blurred memories started to coalesce as we climbed the stairs to Kita-Shirahebi—to early in the morning of March thirteenth, when Miss Gaen sliced me up.

The way things were going, did it mean I’d climb up to the shrine, find Miss Gaen waiting for me, be cut to pieces again, this time with the enchanted blade Yumewatari, to revive? Yeah, the thought of getting sliced up again wasn’t exactly thrilling.

I had to wonder about hell’s so-called way of doing things.

“Speaking of,” Hachikuji said, “is Miss Ononoki doing well?”

“Hm.”

“Is it because they’re colleagues? That person didn’t talk up Miss Ononoki, but during that business with the Darkness, Miss Ononoki helped me out big time. I was hoping to ask you about her when we met at last.”

“Ononoki…”

Right, now that Hachikuji mentioned it.

They were only in contact for those few days when we faced the Darkness, but maybe journeys like those were a bonding experience. Or maybe, as aberrations of a similar age, they just clicked—either way, my impression was that they got along fairly well.

In contrast to the bad terms Shinobu and Ononoki were on.

That shikigami acts in pretty mysterious ways, so you can't let your guard down around her just because you're friends—I always forget because she's saved me so often, but she and I were at total odds when we first met.

Shinobu's continued animosity was actually the right stance.

I was the weird one, in effect living under the same roof regardless of our past—it was abnormal.

By all rights, I should be scolded.

"Well, she's been lively—though I guess she's dead. Maybe that isn't the right term… But in any case, she's doing well."

"Is that so. Having named her my successor, that's a relief to hear."

"Ononoki's your successor?"

"Yes. Officially approved."

You two must be having plenty of witty conversations, Hachikuji said—and maybe she meant it.

"During our treacherous journey, I asked her to take care of you in my place if the unthinkable happened to me."

"That's a surprise…"

Ononoki didn't have to listen to her request, but if it was valid, the shikigami was doing a better job than Hachikuji imagined.

And not just regarding our banter.

“But Ononoki isn’t included in this Massive Hell-Cruise of yours?”

“There are time considerations at play here.”

“That’s why?”

“Yes. It was a difficult producorial call. I think it should be fine. She got so much attention in the anime.”

“Can you really balance things out like that?”

Balance—I got hung up on the word as it left my mouth.

No, maybe not hung up. It was more like a flash of inspiration.

Lighting up a darkness that had lingered ever since Hachikuji told me about coming back to life—it had obscured my vision and senses even as we approached the end of our pilgrimage, even as we drew closer to my resurrection, that dawn of a new day. It became clear, so late it might not make a difference, as the word left my mouth.

Ah. That’s what was weighing on my mind—balance.

“When you think about it, Mister Araragi, you really are lucky. You not only have a pretty girlfriend, a kind and wise friend, a talented junior, and two energetic little sisters—now you’re also cohabitating with a reliable tween.”

“…”

“A life anyone would envy. Lived in the lap of luxury. Someone in your position shouldn’t be too self-deprecating—in excess, modesty turns to sarcasm, you know? It’d be like saying you want to die because you can’t earn ten billion yen.”

Was it so enviable to be living with Ononoki? But it was true that I was blessed in a host of ways.

That was exactly why, though.

I sought balance.

Emotional balance.

Who was it that first kept going on about balanced designs□Mèmè Oshino? I'd been worried about that old bastard's negative influence on Hanekawa, who planned to roam the world, but maybe I'd been poisoned by his ideology too.

"The right thing…"

"Excuse me? What was that, Mister Araragi?"

"Oh, it's just that I remembered an argument I had with the Fire Sisters, with all their talk of justice□it came to me out of nowhere. Maybe it's because I'm in hell that I'm thinking of a topic I'd rather avoid."

"Hm. We'll be at the summit soon, so keep it short if you have something to say. This could be the last time we ever talk, after all."

"What…"

Then I'd rather talk about something else.

But the topic had come to me precisely because I was in hell. I'd wanted to ask for Hachikuji's opinion, and decided to continue.

"It's hard to do the right thing."

"Hard. What would it be in this case? Quite a lot of standards can determine what's right and what's not."

"In this case, a simple kind of rightness, so simple you don't even need to think about standards. It's so right that no one would ever disagree, but surprisingly, I sometimes can't bring it about, or realize it. No need to relativize□"

"Aha. This is like the discussion that at their core, humans are evil. I like talking about that kind of thing."

"No, I'm not trying for the kind of dialogue you get stuck in as an adolescent… How do I put it… It's not about evil, it's just that we're immature."

“Immature, you say.”

“Maybe that’s why people spend so much energy on Fire Sisters-like stuff. Okay, my sisters just go from one extreme to another, but don’t a lot of people get more worked up about righting wrongs than doing the right thing?”

“Righting wrongs isn’t doing the right thing?”

“They’re similar on the surface, or maybe close but not quite the same—to correct my own error, so to speak, maybe the right word isn’t right but smite.”

“…”

That’s confusing spoken out loud, Hachikuji opined with a vague expression—true, like her look, what I was saying was difficult to parse.

Not just my phrasing, but the point itself—I was talking about justice, evil, and right in a far from probing way. Maybe splashing around in the shallow end only made things harder.

“You mean people preferring to criticize the words and deeds of others who’re trying to do the right thing, just finding fault instead?”

“Mm, I guess?”

Not exactly.

Though she was correct for the most part.

My key point was that righting wrongs makes people feel like they’re doing the right thing—which is why distinguishing between the two can be so hard.

Not just for the person in question, but for everyone else. Even an independent body’s judgment might fall short of the task…

“What do you think, Hachikuji?”

“What do I think? ‘Boy, it’s been a while since Mister Araragi has said something this misanthropic. The regular programming, is it? Glad he’s okay,’ is about it.”

“I’m getting a little worried about your image of me…”

“If you’re being critical, then allow me to point out this contradiction. Calling people out for mixing up ‘righting wrongs’ with ‘doing the right thing’ is just another instance of the same.”

She’d complicated things.

What a tangled mess.

If she was right, then I was contradicting myself, grandly at that. Fortunately, that wasn’t my point at all.

I wasn’t being critical.

I was being supportive, if anything.

“If you keep on righting every wrong and stamp out every last mistake, are you going to be left with a pure, bright rightness? Maybe it’ll be a pure, dark rightness, but anyway, if you boil it down, that’s what I want to know.”

“…”

“When you remained in the world of the living, Hachikuji, you were doing something wrong…or at least, something you weren’t supposed to be doing. And like nature’s providence came□”

The Darkness.

“You got burned□you nearly became a wandering soul, unable to pass on to heaven or hell.”

“I nearly ceased to exist altogether. Yes, I was in danger there.”

She sounded unmoved, but it was harrowing□so much so that she felt indebted to Ononoki.

“No, no, I’m grateful mainly because she let me ride on her shoulders so I could kiss you.”

“Can’t you show a little more tact?!”

I was trying to avoid the topic! I thought we had an unspoken agreement to just kind of gloss over it!

“You know what? It’s a very Japanese way of thinking, that not failing is the easier way up the ladder to success than succeeding.”

“…”

I’d say it’s surprisingly global.

“You’re preparing for college exams that grade you based on how many questions you get wrong. I can understand why you might be attracted to these ideas, and I myself wouldn’t reject them outright. It’s just that living your life that way means never getting what you really want.”

“Never getting…what I really want?”

“You’re assuming that someone is going to evaluate you. You’ll only ever receive what others give you in that case. It isn’t a bad thing, of course□but going about life that way, you’ll never exceed yourself and your capabilities, which is what you’ve desired.”

You have to make a lot of mistakes.

You have to fail a lot of times.

You have to try again, and again, and again.

You have to hesitate and get frustrated.

To go through round after round of trial and error.

And after all the blame and criticism□

“Only then can you succeed, wouldn’t you say?”

“I wasn’t…trying to put the spotlight on me. But maybe it is like

that—no, that's how it should be."

"If you live your life only righting wrongs, then before you realize, you'll need other people and the world to be wrong—and frankly, that's a dangerous line of thinking. Nothing admirable about it."

"Hm…"

"You said this wasn't about you. In which case, who might you be speaking of?"

"…"

That was a hard one to answer.

The Fire Sisters, those defenders of justice? No, this discussion didn't even apply to them—nothing ran through their heads.

In that case, was I talking about Oshino?

The man who stressed balance, always mediating between right and wrong, good and evil, here and there—was I talking about a guy who declared that people just go and get saved on their own?

No, the person I had in mind.

That I wanted to discuss—was that girl.

The transfer student, his niece.

Ogi Oshino—I wanted to talk about her.

How odd that her name hadn't crossed my mind, that I didn't recall her—the most important individual in the second half of this year of my life.

Was she another exception in this pilgrimage? Hachikuji showed no signs of bringing up her name.

Of course, Ogi's stance toward me was very different from Senjogahara's or Hanekawa's. She had her way of appearing reserved even as she constantly pushed herself onto me. In that

sense, maybe she was treated by this place like Kanbaru.

Similar to Kanbaru?

I'd never thought of it that way… Huh, so they were in the same category… Ogi might be glad to hear that since she'd called herself a devotee of Kanbaru's.

I considered bringing up that transfer student, and how I might do so, but I ran out of time before I could find the right words.

The stairs ended.

We walked under Kita-Shirahebi Shrine's torii gate.

As we did, a new scene□didn't appear before our eyes. Just Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

The shrine before it was rebuilt, though.

In a state of crumbling disuse, disrepair, and decay□a forgotten place, a sorry sight. The grounds of a shrine you wouldn't recognize as such unless someone told you.

The same state as when Kanbaru and I first visited it together, though no snakes had been nailed to the surrounding trees.

The missing detail may have been a flaw, given that Sengoku had come down the stairs. Of course, crucified snakes aren't a pretty sight, so I felt only relief over that detail being omitted.

Even without it, because I'd gotten used to the current, restored□or more like freshly built from the ground up□Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, its decrepit state felt grisly enough.

My guard, down thanks to bantering with Hachikuji, went back up. The fact that we hadn't walked into another space or dimension seemed to indicate that we were at the end of the nonsensical route that began at the park.

Correcting what was out of position.

No, Hachikuji had been downright opaque—she was going to dislodge us from the correct position. Was she going to explain what she meant already?

Then.

Ahead of us on the shrine path.

In front of the collapsed shrine's sanctuary—around the offering box.

Someone was waiting for us.

Unlike the others—Shinobu and Senjogahara, Hanekawa and Sengoku—this person's eyes were trained on me, clearly awaiting me.

I did expect to see someone at the shrine—though maybe it was more premonition than expectation.

Or a case of déjà vu.

March thirteenth.

I'd climbed the stairs like this only to be sliced into pieces by Miss Gaen, who'd actually been lying in wait—but no, another part of me thought there might not be anyone.

Because when I tried to meet Miss Kagenui a month ago—when I tried to meet her as promised and visited our meeting spot, Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, I got stood up.

Yozuru Kagenui.

That violent onmyoji—was still missing.

Ononoki never made any meaningful comment on the subject, which was normal given her personality—if she has a personality at all—but as someone who'd been left hanging by Miss Kagenui, and who'd taken in her shikigami, I couldn't help but worry about her safety.

Which is why.

I had a premonition that someone would be lying in wait at the shrine, even if it was just a set located in hell—and simultaneously a premonition that no one would be there. Having both premonitions meant that one of them would be right, but still.

I couldn't help but be shocked—I couldn't hold back my surprise at the identity of the individual waiting for us.

Sitting atop the elegant offering box, so twisted and creaking that it seemed ready to burst, was—neither Izuko Gaen nor Yozuru Kagenui.

Like them, an expert.

But an expert unlike them.

An expert who was dead.

A doll-user who'd been smashed dead to pieces.

Tadatsuru Teori.

"Hello—Araragi. I've been waiting."

007

“Wha…”

I unconsciously took a step back—nearly tumbling right down the stairs. If I’d gotten tangled up with Hachikuji, we might have swapped bodies along the way.

“Wh-Why are you here…”

He was supposed to be dead.

His body smacked by Yotsugi Ononoki’s Unlimited Rulebook—earning him a death so complete that not a single chunk of his flesh remained in the world of the living.

I was shocked into silence.

When I thought about it, though, my reaction didn’t make sense.

I was overreacting.

We were in hell.

He was dead, yes, but so was I. It was absolutely natural for him to be here—we were meeting again in the afterlife.

I did wonder why an expert like him was all the way down here in Avīci, but he was an outsider, excluded even from Miss Gaen’s network… And personally, when I thought about what the guy did to Kanbaru, Tsukihi, and Karen, I couldn’t help but think that Avīci was too lukewarm for him.

What was it, then?

Why did it feel wrong?

Being reunited with him felt wrong in an utterly different way from running into Hachikuji in the depths of hell—wrong, or like a puzzle piece fitting in a place you never expected, a strangely convincing (?) feeling…

No, ultimately, it didn't make any sense at all.

"Why that look, Araragi? I do appreciate how expressive you are… While a lot did happen between us, that was back when we were alive. Water under the bridge," Tadatsuru said breezily.

He seemed the most different from how I remembered him back when I was alive—given how tense the situation and circumstances were back then, maybe a different impression was inevitable, but wasn't our current predicament down in the depths of hell no less dire?

Why was he—oh.

That's what I wanted to know.

Why was he acting so accustomed?

In the world of the living, too, I'd met and faced off against him at Kita-Shirahebi (though it may have already been newly built)—but why did he seem so much more natural now as he sat there on the offering box? Not that it was a good idea, given how close it was to falling apart…

"Why don't the two of us get along? We've both been sent to hell, after all. Heh, just a little joke there," he said, relaxed enough to crack wise.

A joke? What did he mean, a joke?

What about his words just now were a joke?

How much of it was a joke?

Okay, everything he said sounded like a mean joke… He used to belong to the same university club as Oshino and Kaiki, so who knows, maybe he was endowed with a comedic mind.

I could do without his, here in hell—but as someone who'd conversed with Oshino and Kaiki, I knew I had nothing to gain by pressing him for details. I had to turn to the fifth grader standing by my side.

"Hey, Hachikuji."

"What might it be, Mister Aaaaagi?"

"I like the simplicity, but you shouldn't call people things that sound like hastily entered RPG hero names. My name is Araragi."

"I'm sorry. A slip of the tongue."

"No, you did it on purpose…"

"A skip from the young."

"Or maybe not?!"

"A slip of the slip."

"You're not putting any thought into that one either?! But tell me what's going on. Why is he here—why is Tadatsuru Teori there? You weren't calling this guy she, were you?"

"No, no, you were right, it's Miss Izuko Gaen. Don't worry, our hearts were one on that point."

"Then why?"

I looked at Tadatsuru again.

He almost seemed to be smiling on our conversation, or maybe my confusion. It was a look I didn't remember seeing on him before.

Just as Kaiki was an expert who acted only in the service of money, you could say Tadatsuru acted only in the service of "aesthetic curiosity." Was he finding beauty in my panic, Hachikuji's composure, and our interaction, or what?

"You were right to think that Miss Gaen was the august self. But—"

“There you go acting reverent again.”

“The grand intent of her august self, or rather, intentions were conveyed to me by Mister Teori over there.”

“C-Conveyed.”

A game of telephone.

She’d used the phrase earlier—so that’s what she meant?

Huh? That seemed a little… Did that timeline make sense? No, not just the timeline. This put a fundamental kink in all sorts of other lines.

Miss Gaen’s network didn’t include Tadatsuru, so why was he relaying her message to Hachikuji?

“Again, Araragi, why that look? I don’t know everything, unlike my senior, and can’t clear everything up for you, but at least I can give you a rundown of what I do understand. You may see us as alike, but I’m a bit more generous than Oshino or Kaiki—so long as my own interests aren’t involved.”

“Aren’t they in this case?” Coming from Tadatsuru, his familiar, even accommodating tone only made me more suspicious—but I retook the step I’d ceded, as if to protect Hachikuji. “You’re an expert who specializes in exterminating immortal aberrations—right? I’m unforgivable to you just by existing. You see me as something like a pest.”

“A pest? You’re being a little too self-deprecating there. But if you’ll allow me, you’re in the right ballpark—still, Araragi. If that’s what’s worrying you, there’s no need to feel that way now.”

“Huh?”

“Because now—there’s nothing vampiric about you. In both senses.”

You’re a regular human. Thrown into hell. A regular human, Tadatsuru said.

“Any vampirism has been subtracted from you.”

“Subtracted…”

Ah… Now it made sense.

That’s what Hachikuji meant earlier. Not just multiplication and division, but subtraction too was in play…

The value being subtracted was my vampirism.

I, myself, didn’t feel any different. Nothing about my body seemed off, back in the world of the living or in hell but if there was no law condemning all aberrations to hell, it meant nothing about me was vampiric now.

So I was human.

Nothing but human, no longer subject to extermination by the expert hand of Tadatsuru Teori so that’s what it was.

“…”

Of course, believing him, and carelessly approaching him, were a different matter.

While I didn’t understand what was going on, I knew for sure that he’d harmed my junior and my little sisters

“It’s okay, Mister Araragi.” Hachikuji patted me from behind as if to soothe me. “I understand how you feel, but stopping here gets in the way of my tour. Please keep going. This is necessary in bringing you back to life as a human.”

“…”

“Otherwise, the subtraction will have been for nothing. I’d never be able to look Miss Ononoki in the eyes again.”

Why bring her up now, I wondered but realized that while Hachikuji and I got along as well as we did, she was at her core a fairly shy girl.

Tadatsuru Teori.

If we were just going to talk—then maybe it was okay?

Either way, I'd get nowhere acting so tense… Even putting aside the tour, I couldn't move forward unless I moved ahead.

"Stay behind me," I warned Hachikuji.

Still protecting her, I walked the shrine's path—come to think of it, a shrine in hell was yet another ridiculous setup.

If she'd come to get me at Tadatsuru's request, then my chivalry was a little pointless, but I just had to.

"It's almost like you're a prince, Araragi. Riding not a white horse but a white snake, given the god enshrined here."

Whether this was an attempt at wit or something else entirely, Hachikuji and I drew closer to him as he spoke.

In the meantime, I tried to recall more details about his profile. With my memory still fuzzy from the intense shock of being murdered, not to mention finding myself in hell, maybe it was futile—but I felt like I needed to remember what I could.

You go to war with the army you have.

That's how humans are.

Tadatsuru Teori, an expert doll-user.

Who incorporated origami into his job.

Digging into his roots, he was a college clubmate of Kaiki and Oshino—a member of the occult research club, which also included Yozuru Kagenui and a university-aged Izuko Gaen, who must have headed it.

And as students, they created the "doll" known as Yotsugi Ononoki.

Using the corpse of a human who'd lived for a hundred years, they

gave form to a tween shikigami—and how did the story go? Did he and Miss Kagenui come to an impasse over who owned the familiar?

Tadatsuru would go on to part ways with Miss Gaen as well—while all of them followed their own paths as experts, only his headed in a different direction…

He and I met as something strange began taking place in my body—when I began to grow vampiric on my own, and not under Shinobu's influence…

After a fight, he was slain by the doll he created—you could call it chickens coming home to roost, but his death was so spectacular that words like "karma" didn't do it justice.

It was a Hindenburgian crash that could finish off even a vampire, lesser ones at least, which is why meeting him again felt so bewildering.

Now I knew what characters in manga and stuff meant by that oft-used line, See you in hell!

This goes without saying, but it doesn't feel too good when it actually happens to you.

Our reunion, however, was more complicated than mortal enemies meeting again in hell after their deaths—if Miss Gaen planned this, what was her intention, anyway?

Would the explanation he said he'd give me be honestly satisfying? You might be getting annoyed by now, but let me repeat, I was still plenty baffled that I was in hell.

Reluctant to speak with him up close, I stopped and maintained a distance of about five steps. Hachikuji halted too—seeing this, Tadatsuru began.

"Yotsugi—is she doing well? I hope killing me wasn't too traumatic for her."

"You're one of her birth parents, you should know the answer to

that. She doesn't worry about anything—she just eats ice cream and stuff, like always."

"Yes, I'm sure. I am one of her birth parents, of course…one of her creators, so I know. But I ask out of affection, not to pry into her affairs—I always find myself worried about her, even when there's no need."

I never did apprise her of the circumstances, after all—said Tadatsuru.

The circumstances?

"What circumstances…are those?"

"Well. She doesn't need to be told, being a shikigami who simply follows orders. That's her strength—her advantage. The same goes for Yozuru—though in that woman's case, she simply doesn't bother to consider the fine details. I suppose controlling the uncontrollable was where our senior was going to shine."

"…Are you not going to explain these circumstances?"

Though Tadatsuru Teori's demeanor was so proper that comparing him to someone as frivolous as Oshino was silly, my inability to read him did remind me of the Hawaiian-shirted expert.

I used to feel the same kind of constant irritation when I spoke with Oshino. We see the past through rose-colored glasses so I gave him high marks as an expert, but that particular memory was cast in the same harsh light.

"I will. If I don't hurry up and bring you back to life, Miss Gaen might lose her temper—she is a scary one when she's mad."

"…"

"To put it bluntly, the true role I'd been assigned was precisely to be killed by Yotsugi in that way."

Tadatsuru looked as earnest as could be.

“Being killed by her so I could come to hell first so that I may handle the preparations to bring you back to life. That was my job as an expert.”

008

“Huh?”

For a moment, I didn’t understand a word of it. A second passed, and then a minute, and I still didn’t.

It must have taken me a full five minutes to comprehend his words—both he and Hachikuji waited patiently for my brain to crawl to that point.

I felt sorry for making them wait, but the only answer I could give with my boggled mind was, “Y-You’re saying you pretended to die?”

That’s it. Even I was disappointed in me.

It wasn’t about pretending to be dead, we were in hell, nowhere you get by pretending.

But I want to say most people’s answers would have resembled mine if their conclusion were to check out against common sense and past events. Few could have a conundrum of this caliber thrust before them and fire straight back with a brilliant response.

Hanekawa, maybe?

“Pretending to die—isn’t quite it,” Tadatsuru graded me dutifully.

Maybe this betrayed a nasty personality, but expecting anything else from Kaiki and Oshino’s clubmate was its own reflection on yourself.

“I am, in fact, dead. But you aren’t too far off the mark. I’m pretending to be dead in a sense—as if I’ve come across a bear.”

“A…bear?”

“A bugbear, if you want. A devil,” he quipped before continuing—maybe there was some deeper meaning, but he was easily over thirty if you did the math despite his youthful looks. Maybe it was nothing more than a pun.

A devil, though…

“Where should this explanation start—Oshino is glib, and Kaiki clever with his words, while I don’t speak to people often. I was a lonely child who played with dolls.”

“…”

“I’ll try my best and pick a clear starting point. As a human, as an individual, I’ve been dead for quite some time,” he divulged casually. Between his words and his tone, he certainly was a poor explainer if not exactly a poor speaker. It was kind of tragic if he’d become a doll-user because he always played with his dolls alone, but putting that aside—

“For quite some time? Um, what do you mean?”

“The me that Yotsugi killed was a doll I controlled—a substitute self, or perhaps body double you’d expect any doll-user to wield.”

“…”

“Hm? I was bracing for more pointed questions from you around now, but you’ve gone silent. Conversations with people never go as well as those with figurines.”

While playing alone with dolls and speaking to figurines were similar, they gave off very different impressions, but either way—I’d gone silent because I’d been left speechless.

If Tadatsuru thought I’d react promptly, I’m sorry, but he was overestimating me—faced with situations they never even imagined, people usually freeze up and can’t say a word. That said, as a high school kid who loves manga, anime, TV shows, today’s popular entertainment, I’d have no response or rebuttal if you called me a fool for not having imagined it at least.

A body-double doll.

A standard move for a doll-user.

Then he wasn't pretending to be dead—but had pretended to be alive?

To be alive, so that he could be killed?

"You said…Ononoki didn't know, right?" I asked.

"Correct. Not just her, Yozuru didn't, either—though in her case, she probably didn't bother trying to find out. Ever a seeker of intensity, she must not have been interested in shabby old me—what a sad romance it was."

"Romance…"

"Oh, forget it. It's in the past. Hearing an older guy reminisce and ramble on about his love life would only bore a youngster. As for Kaiki? He's a liar, after all, but I'd say the only ones who knew about my technique were—Miss Gaen and Mèmè Oshino."

"…"

Only a woman who knew everything—Miss Gaen.

And a man who acted like he saw through everything, Oshino.

Hearing their names, they did strike me as the type to notice details that people were trying to hide—but the question was when he started to harbor this secret.

The point wasn't unrelated to me. A fact that turned his position as an expert upside down, roots and all, it fundamentally changed the meaning of the night of February thirteenth, what happened exactly a month ago.

That kidnapping—that blackmail.

That battle, that calamity.

How did this rewrite it all?

“A doll destroyed a doll. That’s all that happened—so, Araragi. I brought up Yotsugi, but if your indirect involvement in my death was weighing on you, go ahead and unburden yourself.”

“It’s not that simple…”

To be honest, I did feel that way, a little.

If all this was the whole point—then I wasn’t just indirectly but directly involved in Tadatsuru’s death. I’d be lying if I said that didn’t weigh on me at all. Learning that it was a doll that had gotten smashed to pieces back then was poor comfort, but I did feel a little less tense.

It raised the question, however, of why he did what he did. I wanted to cross-examine him and point out that he’d ended up in hell anyway—and so the burden stayed on my shoulders.

“Then what was that farce for? What was the point? What were you trying to accomplish by abducting three people who’re very important to me?”

“A farce, you say. I personally saw it as a tour de force.” Tadatsuru smiled. “In a sense, you see, dying and coming back to life is my specialty. Even more than it is a vampire’s.”

“Specialty?”

“Not that I ever came back to life, strictly speaking. I simply possessed a doll and returned to the world of the living through a medium—my true body is always on this side.”

This side.

Which, here in hell, meant the next life—our situation made demonstratives tricky, but he seemed far too familiar with this world…and what he just said had to be the main reason. If his true body was located here, that’s where this side referred to.

“Oh, but know that I’m not a resident of Avīci. Being seen as

someone who went to hell hurts worse than actually being in hell.”

“Sure, I just had the same experience… In fact, it hasn’t let up one bit.”

“Normally, I live up in heaven, without a care in the world.”

“…”

This instantly wiped out any guilt I might have felt over his death…

A child like Hachikuji getting sent to hell after passing on to the afterlife in a moving manner was quite a letdown, but the idea of enjoying the good life in heaven chipped away at my motivation to live in its own way.

I mean, why not hurry up and die rather than risk sinning throughout a poorly lived life… Not that I knew how serious Tadatsuru was being.

“Since when? When did you decide to kick back and retire—or I should say, how long have you been leading this lifestyle of traveling between this world and the other?”

“Call it labor, not a lifestyle,” Tadatsuru answered. “Maybe migrant labor—or transmigratory labor. No, I was still a healthy soul in a healthy body back in college. A healthy human specimen. I became a doll-user after creating the doll known as Yotsugi, and after breaking away from the others.”

“I’m not sure how much I should ask you about this since it sounds private… But was creating Ononoki, and Miss Kagenui ending up as her owner, your motive for becoming a doll-user?”

“Motive? You make it sound so criminal. To get to your point, though, it isn’t far enough from the truth to call it a lie—in my telling of it, at least. Miss Gaen and Yozuru may have a differing opinion—oops.”

Tadatsuru looked up at the sky.

This drew me into looking up as well, but I saw nothing in

particular—the sky was just at the border between day and night, as dusk fell.

Not a single cloud, not a single bird.

I had no idea what Tadatsuru was looking at, but he seemed to have spotted something in the spotless sky. “It seems we’re being told to hurry—so I can’t provide a full account of why I became a doll-user. You’ll just have to wait for the theatrical spin-off,” he said.

A spin-off is one thing, but really? A movie? Just how big of a prequel did he want?

“Allow me to give you a succinct explanation. If you’re just dying to know more, then ask Miss Gaen once you’re alive again—she knows everything, so she might even disclose more details than I could. Whether she will is another question, of course… I chose this path after college, but my old senior does look upon me with scorn. Things rarely went for me as I hoped, and my business never gained any traction. That’s when I had a hasty thought—I see it as foolish now, but a sort of forbidden technique, if you would. A taboo amongst experts, or perhaps something closer to a curse.”

“A curse…” I’d heard the word somewhere before.

“Maybe I should describe it as transforming myself into an aberration—the existence of Yotsugi Ononoki, the doll I created as a student, lay at the root naturally. Which is to say, I thought I might turn the corpse of Tadatsuru Teori into an aberration just as I’d done to her hundred-year-old cadaver.”

I attempted to create a doll aberration called Tadatsuru Teori. A doll of myself—using my own corpse.

“And did you succeed?”

It seemed preposterous. If that was possible, you could gain undying, eternal youth. I was aware of the existence of immortality, given that I lived in a world that had formerly human vampires… Still, a human turning a human into an aberration was unbelievable.

What drove him to it? Aesthetic curiosity?

“I failed, and this is the result. Half-man, half-spirit, I wander between this world and the other—no, maybe I ought to say I’m stuck between this world and the other.”

“Don’t tell me you can’t abide immortal aberrations because you resent that.”

“I can’t deny there’s that element.”

“You can’t…”

“Is this where I make a joke about feeling out of my own element?” asked Hachikuji, from behind me.

That’s what she says after staying quiet for all this time? She knew she didn’t have to meet any wordplay-density quota, right? What a strong sense of duty, even here in hell.

“While I say I failed, I’m still able to live via my dolls—and since I was later successful in their mass production, in a sense I gained undying, eternal youth, and am an aberration. Like a doppelganger—or perhaps a half-a-ganger? I decided to make the most of my idiosyncratic nature as I applied myself to my profession.”

“…”

And those idiosyncrasies permitted him to do as much as he did even outside of Miss Gaen’s network… Was that the takeaway?

“And that’s the story of Tadatsuru Teori… Is that good enough for you, Araragi? Or are you interested in hearing more?”

“Um…”

Honestly, I wasn’t that interested, though I wouldn’t say it to his face—he’d given me a suitable overview of his unique circumstances. Now it made sense.

I imagined there were other dramatic episodes, various twists and

turns before he became a full-fledged doll-user, but my interest□my questions lay beyond that.

“Just to be sure, nothing serious happened to you even when Ononoki blew you to smithereens?”

“I wouldn’t say nothing serious. My dolls are a very serious matter to me, and I lost one□but in terms of my life, no, you needn’t worry. I was half-dead to begin with.”

“But why pretend to be dead…” Or rather, alive. Why that entire farce?

“Again, it wasn’t a farce□neither Yozuru nor Yotsugi knew anything about it, after all. I would call it a live test performance, with no rehearsal. Let’s go back to last month,” Tadatsuru said, his eyes still turned upward. What was he seeing there, anyway? “I received a request for my services as an expert, Araragi, to resolve the anomalies occurring in your town.”

He dove in with no introduction□or so it seemed, but I guess he was talking about it this entire time. He’d been waiting here to tell me□having asked Hachikuji to fetch me just so he could.

It wasn’t to apologize for his long silence, or about what happened a month ago□and whatever ill will I felt toward him had waned significantly during our exchange.

“Anomalies occurring in my town… You mean Kita-Shirahebi Shrine and□no, that can’t be it. That was solved already last month.” To be precise, we hadn’t solved it as much as returned it back to an unsolved state, but no need to nitpick.

“Yes. This request, simpler than that, painted you and the former Kissshot as my targets. Miss Gaen’s network certified you as harmless, but that was none of my business□in fact, aberrations protected by her network ought to be my top priority. I should’ve moved against you even without a request.”

“…”

Right, that was how it went.

He took my two little sisters and a junior hostage, an unimaginably cruel and villainous act, in order to come after me and Shinobu—he claimed it wasn't a farce, so I was on the edge of my seat as to why. A request, though, meant I'd had his motive right from the start.

If he was obligated to eliminate me and Shinobu after taking on a request, he was being perfectly honest in describing it as not a farce but a tour de force, a live test performance with no rehearsal—

"Yes, right. Exactly…" Tadatsuru nodded, unconcerned and unembarrassed. It almost felt like a magic show where you got to learn how the tricks were performed—okay, no real magician does that. "It'd be exactly right—if someone hadn't acted first. In fact, it would've been worse otherwise. Your little sisters and your junior might not have made it out in one piece…"

"Don't say stuff like that. You're scaring me."

"I'm the scared one here. Little did I know that Suruga Kanbaru was a Gaen daughter… I shudder to imagine what might have happened if I, in my ignorance, had harmed her. I'm glad I heard about it in advance."

"…?"

She indeed was Miss Gaen's neice—and he must not have known that when he kidnapped her, but shudder to imagine? Miss Gaen wasn't the type to dote on someone just because she was her niece. He did use the word daughter—was he afraid of Kanbaru's late mother?

"You heard about it in advance—and someone acted first—which almost makes it sound like Miss Gaen informed you prior to getting your request. About what was up in our town."

It seemed possible. Apparently, Miss Gaen coming forth and handling a job on her own was quite rare—but what she'd tried to do was something like pacify, or maybe govern our town… She'd even enlisted the help of Episode, a dangerous expert, so she might also have reached out to an old acquaintance outside of her network and spoken to Tadatsuru Teori—

“No, never. She and I are somewhat like odd bedfellows at the moment, but we only came into contact after I learned about the situation. The one to approach me to act as a mediator between me and Gaen, was someone else.”

A mediator.

I had a hunch when I heard that word. The kind that only someone studying for exams would have but I felt certain for whatever reason. This hunch spoke a man’s name to me with more eloquence than any well-reasoned theory…

“Oshino,” I said without thinking. “Was the person who tipped you off in advance who acted first…Mèmè Oshino?”

009

Of course, there were other possibilities.

Among people I knew who were aware of the situation, for example, Kaiki. I'd made a leap of logic based on a single word, but equating Oshino with mediation was going a little too far.

"Exactly," Tadatsuru replied nonetheless. "Right, that guy who acts like he sees through everything is an executive in Miss Gaen's network□so when he contacted me, an outsider, he seemed as free a spirit as ever. The word executive suits no one worse."

"…"

Likewise, calling Miss Gaen a boss didn't seem too fitting□an old acquaintance you just couldn't cut loose sounded more like it than any exaggerated title.

Oshino and Tadatsuru were old acquaintances too, whether they liked it or not. The folklorist might very well go meet the doll-user. As far as timing, it must have happened after Oshino left my town□I wondered what he told Tadatsuru.

A guy who acts like he sees through everything. In acting first, what might he do?

"He told me there was something I could do because I didn't belong to our senior's network. Very much in character for a guy who loves to resort to tricks that feel like cheating."

"…"

"By which I don't mean that he cuts corners because he's lazy. He does everything that can be done and takes out every insurance policy available, and as a result the majority of his endeavors come out to nothing. He's like a squanderer of wisdom, an anti-thrift

expert. Getting me involved must have been like going beyond insurance in duplicate, a rare case even for him."

I sort of got that. Just in my own experience, he'd covered the possibility of me and Shinobu contacting him from another timeline—guessing on tests must be a foreign concept to him. Despite his frivolous demeanor, he was surprisingly diligent.

"But he doesn't spell things out fully and clearly," Tadatsuru said. "When he came to see me, he gave me the impression that he just wanted to chat with me. What a buffoon, is all I thought—I suppose his visit was nothing more than a precaution, originally."

"I have gripes of my own about the way Oshino likes to drop hints—but are you saying he sprinkled Kanbaru's background into your chat?"

Come to think of it, Oshino had been curious about her background—even he must have been surprised to encounter his college senior's niece.

He even made sure of Kanbaru's mother's name.

"Yep. And, Araragi. Your name came up too—or perhaps I should say your names."

"Our names? Me and…" Who? In this case, Shinobu?

"Which is why I grasped, or understood, a few things about this town before accepting my request. At the time, I had no idea what he was trying to say—but I think he was trying to promote just how safe you were."

"…"

"That's what he hinted. It wouldn't be worth wasting a doll on you two—that's what Oshino came to tell me. By the way, that's also when I learned he saw through my true identity. You know, in hindsight, it may have been a threat. As in, put a hand on my friends and I'll tell everyone what you are—a doll."

Tadatsuru gave a wry smile.

What could I say… I was at a loss for words—Oshino had made a move in anticipation of what was to come?

Our official “harmless” label only applied within their network, so he contacted outside parties to protect me and Shinobu. Perhaps he just saw it as proper aftercare, having been properly compensated for a job—but I was moved to hear about such thorough follow-up customer service.

Not something I could do, or did do—wait. Hold on a sec.

In the end, Tadatsuru still came to my town to exterminate me and Shinobu—hmm… Oshino had worked behind the scenes in advance, but the dots remained unconnected.

What happened after that?

“Well, it was insurance—again, most of what he said, he only insinuated, an unlit cigarette in his mouth. This is going to be my own interpretation, but if you’re fine with that, then hearing me out should clear up most of your doubts—you should be able to return to life without any regrets.”

“Without any regrets…”

“Think of my take as a souvenir,” Tadatsuru said. “This was the case he made—‘Koyomi Araragi and Shinobu Oshino. As a rule, they’re harmless right now.’—‘You don’t have to act on it, they won’t be a problem at all.’ ‘That isn’t to say, though, that an exception to that rule couldn’t occur—if Araragi conspires with Shinobu to become a vampire again and again.’”

“…”

“In other words, the application Oshino filed to have you considered as harmless would no longer apply if you began heading down your own vampiric path, apart from your ties to the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.”

“That’s…”

Exactly what happened to my body—I couldn’t believe it.

The guy who acted like he saw through everything, Mèmè Oshino, predicted even this?

“As only one prediction of many, I believe. And it was a concrete fear of his, not some excessive precaution.”

“A fear… He was afraid I’d unthinkingly overuse Shinobu’s power? No…”

That wasn’t it. If he feared that possibility, he wouldn’t have left Shinobu in my hands and skipped town. In fact, I’d convinced myself it was because he trusted that wouldn’t happen, because he believed in me, that he quietly took off to the next town without a word or even a goodbye.

“Yes. In which case, he feared a situation where you’d have no choice—I think that’s why he came to visit me. It’s not like he’s capable of precognition. In fact, he must not have predicted many of the things that attacked your town after he left. Nor can we say for sure that he foresaw an outbreak of cases that’d force you to be reckless. But he did see how you wouldn’t avoid being reckless if such cases did arise.”

“Like that helps,” I spat. I was hardly being gracious.

“A request could come my way were that to happen—that’s what he told me. A request for my involvement. In slaying a vampire. In that event, he wanted me to get in touch with Miss Gaen, putting aside the years of ill will, tossing out that old bad blood, because she’d be waiting to hear from me. She couldn’t make the first move given her position, he said. Not that I really understood him at the time… but that’s exactly what ended up happening.”

He might not be a precog, but that guy must have X-ray vision, the way he sees through things, Tadatsuru muttered. Although I owed Oshino a debt of gratitude, I couldn’t agree more with the doll-user’s sentiment.

“When I received nothing short of a request to slay the two of you, my blood ran cold. At the same time, though, I found it odd. If Oshino feared that eventuality, why hadn’t he done something

about it himself? A guy who says that people just go and get saved on their own, all but relying on an old friend? I was curious—which is why I played along. I contacted Miss Gaen."

Opening the curtain on the farce.

This was his explanation—I still didn't know what it meant.

010

I wasn't sure when Tadatsuru had lowered his gaze, but it lifted again—like he was on the lookout for the first star in the night sky as the sun continued to set and it grew darker. I followed suit and this time saw clearly what he did.

No, clearly is an overstatement—it still looked dim to my eyes, but it was clear what it was.

From the sky—or rather, from the heavens.

Came dangling a strand of string.

"Or a thread, Mister Araragi. It's here to collect you—which makes it sound like it's bringing you to the world of the dead, but actually, it's here from the world of the living," Hachikuji explained.

The world of the living… If it was a thread, it made me think more of Akutagawa's short story about a spider's thread dangled down from heaven by the Buddha.

Well, they say spider silk is tough enough even to be used in space, so I didn't find it unreliable…but how did that story go? Was Kandata the character's name? As he started climbing up the dangling spider's thread, other sinners tried to make it to heaven with him, and when he told them to get down, didn't the thread snap?

In that sense, the thread was a trial—especially if Miss Gaen was doing the dangling.

"You really are running out of time. If you miss that thread, Mister Araragi, you'll burn in Avīci for eternity. An oni thwacking you with a giant knapsack."

"A giant knapsack? Isn't that you?"

“Excuse me. I meant to say with a giant club.”

“Scary either way…” Or maybe cute as hell?

“So, Mister Teori, I’m sorry but can you stop with your story?”

“Hold on, Hachikuji, don’t cut him off like that. Not when he’s in the middle of what I need to hear. Tadatsuru, this thing you could do because you didn’t belong to the network… You mean accepting the job to slay me and Shinobu—or pretending to.”

I was jumping ahead in his story to get as much as possible out of him before the thread (?) from heaven reached the shrine. Not a very praiseworthy move as a listener, but a fortunate one, because the doll-user answered, “I suppose… I pretended to accept it, as I pretended to be alive. Not that I can say exactly what Oshino’s intentions were.”

So that’s how it was.

He continued, “The fact that Yozuru Kagenui was considered uncontrollable despite being part of Miss Gaen’s network was just perfect—she’d confront me with a merciless, ice-cold heart for my illegal act. So when your body started acting up, Miss Gaen sent those two to work—”

“…”

Even before I spoke to her about the strange phenomenon I was experiencing, namely my reflection disappearing, Miss Gaen had dispatched the onmyoji and her familiar—as if she’d foreseen things. Her seeming clairvoyance had sent chills down my spine back then, and I’d chalked it up to her “knowing everything”—but now that I was privy to the secret behind her trick, it was nothing special. That turn of events had been marked down in advance as part of her timeline.

Still, the timing being spot-on was very much like her…

“But why would you do it?” I asked Tadatsuru. “Couldn’t you just turn down the request?”

“I had no reason to, and even if I did, it’d have just gone to another expert. Miss Gaen and I came to the conclusion that playing into the hands of our ‘enemy’ would be best.”

“Y-Your enemy?” Not client? The individual who came to him with the request to slay me and Shinobu. Wouldn’t the two of us have been his enemy instead?

“Not necessarily. To say the least, Deishu Kaiki went missing in your town, and neither I nor Miss Gaen are so cold as to have not cared.”

“Kaiki…”

Right, Miss Gaen had said some such thing the info getting so complicated that she didn’t know what the truth was…

I saw Kaiki as a guy who wouldn’t stay dead even if you killed him, and his friends from college, Miss Gaen and Tadatsuru, must have felt that way more than I did… If the unthinkable had happened, they couldn’t turn a blind eye.

“While I called it playing into the enemy’s hands, it wasn’t as if we knew what the plan was we moved in order to find out. We also had to halt your ongoing transformation into a vampire. I could come to this side and guide you, but having played the part of a hated enemy, we needed to get Hachikuji over there to help out.”

“And I did,” she said. “Find me toward the end of the credits, under Cameo Appearances. Since I’d get to meet you again, I gladly waived my booking fee and gave it my all.”

“Nothing would depress me more than you charging a booking fee to do this… That’d be worse than realizing I’m in hell.”

For the time being, kill me to reset my body, then revive only the human part so that’s what was going on. They could’ve told me in advance, but if they didn’t.

There must have been some reason.

Was that part of their strategy against the enemy? Hard to figure

out from my position.

“If we killed you with the enchanted blade Kokorowatari and revived you with Yumewatari, you might just return as a vampire, and we’d be back where we started. That’s why I, an expert, had to butt in and be ready for you in hell.”

With this, Tadatsuru jumped down from the offering box—my eyes never left him, but a total change came over his outfit as he landed. On second thought, costume might be more apt—not only was his garb now as Japanese as it could be, it matched the occasion.

The vestments of a Shinto priest.

If having only a spiritual body meant instantly changing clothes when you felt like it, that seemed pretty handy—I wasn’t jealous, but maybe kicked back and retired wasn’t far off the mark.

“My former senior and I also agreed that fixing your issue was the only way to counter our enemy. How odd, given that I used to oppose her so vehemently, but let’s simply praise Oshino’s skill as a mediator.”

“Were your doubts ever cleared up?” There were a lot of other things I wanted to ask him, but at the moment, this was foremost on my mind. “You had to go along with Oshino because you didn’t know what his intentions were—that was the key, but did you ever reach a conclusion there?”

“I’m afraid not. I have a hypothesis, though—no, it’d be presumptuous to call it mine. This one, at least, is Miss Gaen’s alone. Her guess as to why Oshino still refuses to show himself. Why he seems to have gone missing. Her thinking—is that it’s for the same reason that Yozuru disappeared without a trace.”

“…”

And what would that be?

Wasn’t that a tautology? As good as saying nothing?

I knew very well that Miss Kagenui had vanished just like

Oshino—hm? No, that wasn't it.

In that sense, Kaiki had disappeared too.

Instead of bringing him up as well, Tadatsuru treated Kaiki as an exception and didn't include him with the other two experts.

Did that provide a way out, or at least, did Miss Gaen see it that way? The solution she sought, when she didn't even know what she was up against…

"My thoughts and hers diverge on that point," Tadatsuru said. "Remember what I told you? Find Oshino. From the looks of it, you came up empty-handed."

"My friends are searching for him, though…"

Actually, only one still had the arsenal of means to find him: Hanekawa. Senjogahara and I had exhausted our connections—not only did we not know where he was and why, we didn't even know whether he was alive.

Only Hanekawa hadn't given up.

I'd seen it as impossible, but our only hope was that he was in fact overseas, where she'd gone looking for him…

"Then that line wasn't part of your performance. Even if the way you pretended to be killed by Ononoki was a farce."

"Not just that one line. Though only a doll died there, most of the things I said were the honest truth. Deception isn't my forte—I may be a doll-user, but feeling like a marionette and not calling my own shots is only humiliating. I felt like I'd been assigned an unpleasant role; the story was taking a twist that was altogether too neat. Of course, half of this was directed at Oshino and how he acts like he sees through everything."

"…"

"I do feel like apologizing to Yozuru, though. I played the role of the nasty villain, but she had to do the nasty work. Even she

must've felt bad about using a shikigami to kill me—and feeling bad…" the priest trailed off.

I wasn't going to comment. Miss Kagenui's mindset was unfathomable to an inexperienced high schooler like me. Honestly, though, she might be even less bothered by it than Ononoki…

"May I tell them?" I asked Tadatsuru.

"Hm?"

"Ononoki…and Miss Kagenui, if we figure out her whereabouts. That you're a doll-user and didn't really die back there. That you pretended to die, or to be alive. I'm getting the sense you don't want too many people to know."

"True, but they'll find out anyway, now that this is happening. It's the right time for it, or rather, it's time for me to pay the piper. I'd appreciate it if you could apologize on my behalf."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Why should I apologize?

Say sorry for me—a common enough request that's unreasonable when you think about it.

Not gonna be his body double…

"If you want to apologize, do it yourself—even if you can't return to life, you can visit the land of the living through one of your dolls, right?"

"It's not that simple, unfortunately. Dying is a fairly grave offense, and getting sent to hell is only the start of it. Every crime is met with a punishment…"

"…"

His setup was more complicated than I'd imagined, then—letting a doll containing his ego get smashed wasn't exactly a painful decision for Tadatsuru, but obviously it hadn't been an easy one

either.

“You’re lucky because the enchanted blade Yumewatari can revive you immediately—Miss Gaen might have slaughtered you without a proper explanation, and as her junior, I must ask you to overlook that fact. It was more convenient to brief you in hell, you see…”

“Well, I’m used to being made a fool of without any kind of proper explanation. That’s fine, but—”

“Don’t worry,” Tadatsuru cut me off, as if to erase any concerns I had before I could voice them. “Once you return to life, you won’t face any more requests from Miss Gaen to help her with ridiculous jobs. Unless she lied to me about her aims, you’ll have fulfilled your role by the time you come back to life as a human. Think of this trip through hell as a short-term hospital stay to excise your vampiric nature. I doubt even she would try to work you as you’re convalescing. Her intent is to remove any concerns prior to the showdown with our enemy—though if you have to impute malice, she might be trying out that pair of enchanted blades.”

“…”

I could see her wanting to do that… If Miss Gaen didn’t have ulterior motives on at least that level, I’d be confused. Still, while Tadatsuru didn’t totally fail to address my interrupted question, that hadn’t been quite it.

Now down from the offering box, the priest continued at a relaxed pace toward the thread dangling from the heavens and stopped right below it.

Then beckoned me over.

“Let’s get going, Mister Araragi,” Hachikuji encouraged me as well—so I had to move. Yes, I had to, that’s exactly how I felt.

The thread came so low that I could jump and grab it—or so I say, but if it wasn’t a string, it wasn’t a thread either.

A white snake.

A snake's tail dangled there.

…They wanted me to grab it?

At least it wasn't the head, and it did make sense□Kita-Shirahebi enshrined a white serpent, after all… A snake was more appropriate than a spider.

"What's the matter, Mister Araragi? You look scared. Is it because it's a snake?"

"I'd be lying if I said no… It's like a phobia at this point."

"If this is about what happened to Miss Sengoku, don't hate yourself too much." My phobia stemmed purely from being bitten countless times by poisonous snake fangs and hovering repeatedly on the brink of death□but Hachikuji waded into an even deeper part of my heart. "It was the aforementioned conman who saved Miss Sengoku's soul, but if he hadn't gotten involved, wouldn't you have saved her eventually? It might've taken a little more time, but I believe you would have."

"…"

"As far as that case goes, think of it as someone swooping in and taking the glory for himself□don't worry, I'll vouch for you. You're the best, Mister Araragi."

I never felt like I'd been competing with anyone, and it wasn't a question of winning or losing□of glory or anything, but hearing that from Hachikuji did help.

To the point I felt like I could even grab onto a snake.

I reached out□and held the white snake's tail.

It twitched.

The thing was alive?

"I'll back her up on that theory, Araragi. In fact, I'm sure our enemy wanted it□you spending a little more time, that is, rather than

anything to do with Nadeko Sengoku herself. Perhaps my irregular turn only arrived because Kaiki's interference threw a wrench into the plan. You were originally supposed to spend more time in a drawn-out battle with Nadeko Sengoku□becoming a vampire in order to save her. Oshino saw my deployment as an insurance policy. So it was for our enemy, too."

Tadatsuru was standing right next to me as he spoke, and it was unnerving on a whole new level.

"…By the way," I said to Hachikuji, "I still haven't asked you. Why was I off?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, the reason you had to act as my guide. When I woke up in hell, I was in that park, even though Miss Gaen killed me at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. You put me back in position□or dislodged me from the correct position. What's that about?"

"Hmm. We don't have any time, and I thought I needn't bother, but you're that curious?"

"I wouldn't go that far?"

Yeah, okay, I was only trying to drag this out.

I was putting off climbing up the white snake□and returning to life.

Postponing it as much as I could.

"Well, I'm curious, yes. Forget the stuff about being out of position. That got taken care of thanks to you□but tell me that park's name, if you say you know it. It's where we first met, but I still don't know how to pronounce it."

Namishiro? Rohaku?

I'd been told neither, but I honestly couldn't think of any other reading. It was too difficult even to appear on a Japanese test□if I really had to guess, maybe Robyaku or Namihaku…

“Shirohebi Park.” It was Tadatsuru who answered. “Originally, it would be read Shirohebi.”

“What? Shirohebi as in ‘white snake’?”

“Not the character we now use for serpents, but another with a common origin. More affiliated with water than pests, its modern meaning is torrent, as in a torrent of tears. Shirohebi was once the entire area’s name at some point, someone wrote it down incorrectly, resulting in the opaque characters.”

Did that make sense? Maybe it did.

I didn’t know about writing them wrong, but I could imagine mistaking one for the other. If I handwrote either to look it up in an electronic dictionary, the other one was similar enough to show up in the list of candidates.

The characters’ order was flipped too, but that did happen from time to time in Japanese to begin with, reading left-to-right was only a modern practice. Things could get jumbled as time passed. Shirohebi…

As in…

“Kita Shirahebi Shrine.”

“Mm-hm. Yes, it was the original location of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine and why you were out of position. You’ve heard that the shrine had been moved…haven’t you?”

“Oh, right.” I forgot who’d told me, but yeah and joining the two was a mistake, leading to distortion, or something?

“I’d call that an understatement in essence, they brought a sea god to a mountain. Technically a lake, not the sea.”

“A lake?”

“Like I said, at first it was written with a character associated with water.”

That seemed good enough for him, but something else caught my attention—a lake. That sounded familiar, but before I could remember…

“Well then, Araragi, why don’t we get going?” urged Tadatsuru. “Say hi to Miss Gaen for me—and to Yotsugi too. I’d never ask Yozuru, but be extra kind to Yotsugi, please, in my place.”

“Sure, I understand,” I agreed out of reflex, maybe too rashly given the nature of his request.

Then I worked up, at last, the nerve to confess what was really on my mind.

“I wonder, though—is it okay for someone like me to come back to life?”

011

“Hiya!”

A punch hit me.

Mayoi Hachikuji’s punch.

Leaping into the air, a heroic jumping play from a dead standstill, still wearing her backpack, she struck my cheek with a closed fist.

Holding nothing back, she put a ridiculous amount of strength into it, despite being more or less an elementary schooler. Enough to send me flying, but I managed to cling on to the snake’s tail, holding it tight reflexively to withstand the punch, wondering if it might tear□fortunately, it seemed to be elastic (?) and merely grew longer as I staggered back.

“That one was for me!” she declared as she landed.

For herself?

That was just called punching me.

Tadatsuru’s eyes were opened wide□did he not know about her feisty side? Had she pulled the wool over his eyes?

“Hey…Hachikuji.”

“Don’t worry. My fist is fine.”

She opened and closed it.

As if I was worried about that.

Sure, you could break your fingers punching someone that hard if you didn’t know how to make a proper fist□but we were in hell.

All of us immortal.

Even I, the victim of her punch, didn't feel much pain in my cheek—in an environment where you could be beaten by metal clubs and come back to life, what was an elementary schooler's fist?

Still.

As clichéd as it might sound, her fist hit my heart harder than my body—my chest hurt far worse than my cheek.

"Then one for Miss Senjogahara, one for Miss Hanekawa, one for Miss Kanbaru, one for Miss Sengoku, one for your two little sisters, one for your parents, one for Miss Oikura, and one for Chiaraijima."

"I'm glad you care for Oikura when you didn't know about her until moments ago, but who was that last person?!"

"And one for Mister Oshino, and one for Mister Kaiki, and one for Miss Kagenui, and…" Hachikuji counted on her fingers—starting to ball her fist just as I thought it'd opened up.

And wait, even for Kaiki?

"As for Miss Ononoki, have her punch you herself once you're alive again."

"There'd be no trace left of me. She literally has bone-crushing strength."

"Is it okay for someone like you to come back to life? What kind of a line is that?" demanded Hachikuji, actually punching my stomach with the fist she'd made.

Whoomp, whoomp.

She did hold back a little this time…or maybe she only hit hard when it was for herself.

"You should be glad it was me who heard your whining. Miss Senjogahara would revert to her old self and treat you to a stationery storm."

“…”

Whoomp, whoomp, whoomp, whoomp.

Hachikuji pummeled me.

She got enough shots in to cover everyone, but I continued to take the punches.

“Miss Hanekawa…would let you fondle her breasts to inspire you, like always, but don’t expect me to spoil you, Mister Araragi.”

“Hold on. Like always? She’s never done that… Could you not make it sound like a regular occurrence, for her sake and for mine?” Even if it almost happened once.

Finally stopping with her punches, Hachikuji said, “What’s wrong, Mister Araragi? Spooked? Do you not want to return to life and have more trying experiences? Are you tired?”

Trying experiences… Of course I didn’t want any.

Tadatsuru thought Miss Gaen wouldn’t make any more absurd requests after I came back to life, but I found that hard to believe (she had a real knack for using people)—and even apart from her, all the things I needed to do once I was back was kind of depressing.

Including taking my entrance exams. Though I wouldn’t make it in time even if I revived now, and all the knowledge I’d crammed into my head, all the memorization, must have been shot out the other side thanks to my sojourn in hell.

But that wasn’t the issue.

I felt depressed, but not spooked—tired, true, but it wasn’t even that.

“When you first came here,” Hachikuji reminded me, “you did feel you could rest in peace now. Are you hoping you’re done with bothersome tasks? Are you picking ‘no’ at the continue screen? Is credit feeding banned here?”

“No, but some taut thread in me snapped…” I glanced at the snake’s tail still in my grip and gazed into the heavens it extended toward. I wasn’t sure I could explain how I felt, but I’d give it my best. “… and part of me feels like I was able to die at last. Yeah, I’m a little hesitant to press continue. Like I’ve had enough, and am not hungry for more…” I learned that heaven and hell, the afterlife, exists, and while my understanding of the meaning of life wasn’t shaken

“In other words, Mister Araragi, you’d rather stay a ghost and settle into a position of watching over everyone?”

“Position… No, it’s not like that at all.”

“You’re only saying this because you don’t know how painful hell really is. I’d love for you to experience children’s limbo for even a day, if we had the time. Being able to come back to life is quite fortunate.”

“…”

Fortunate.

Yes, that was it. What I originally blurted out expressed my true feeling. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to return to life I wasn’t sure if it was okay for someone like me to be so fortunate.

Did I deserve it?

“How do I put it… Maybe I’m wondering if it’s okay for me to come back to life when there are others who must deserve it more. It’s not that I don’t want to, but I feel like I’m jumping the line, or stealing someone’s spot, or trashing the rules cutting in when I shouldn’t.”

Like in my trip through hell so far.

Wouldn’t it have been better for Seishiro Shishirui to save Shinobu?

For Hanekawa to save herself, through Black Hanekawa?

Senjogahara had Kaiki.

Despite Hachikuji's assurances, even Sengoku's case might have been just a quarrel between friends if I hadn't stuck my nose in. To say the least, leaving it to the Fire Sisters, girls her own age, might have been the better choice.

What Kanbaru might call playing second fiddle—I'd felt it keenly over the past six months.

Wasn't I the one taking unfair credit? "Pinch hitter" might be too harsh on myself, but a strong suspicion that it never needed to be me was ensconced in me.

You know what I think?

I still doubted I'd cede the role of being the one to save those girls—placed in the same situation, I'd surely want to be the lead violin or on the starting lineup. In which case I couldn't help but wonder if I shouldn't just stay the hell out of it, and stay in hell?

I'd been ready to sacrifice my life for a legendary vampire, after all.

And to die for Hanekawa's sake.

Senjogahara had turned over a new leaf—she'd be fine even if I died. Then…

Then knowing my place—like a good boy, shouldn't I just die here?

"You do," Hachikuji said. "You do deserve to come back to life. You've at least earned that. Think of all you've done to earn it! And I know it all very well!"

"…"

"The half-year since we parted ways must have been tough, but it couldn't break Koyomi Araragi's spirit, could it? If not you, who ought to be coming back to life? You're the lead, hands down!"

If you keep on moaning, I'm gonna hate you—Hachikuji threatened, before taking a deep breath.

She was preparing for a long line. I steeled myself to hear her

out□to accept her sermon, no matter how sharp or scathing.

“Listen, Mister Araragi. The Mister Araragi I know loved young girls, little girls, tween girls, the underside of skirts, girls’ hips, big breasts, rough treatment, his bigger little sister, his littler little sister, MILFs, topless girls, volleyball shorts, school swimsuits, class presidents, tomboys, cat ears, athletic girls, bandaged girls, panties, eyeball licking, getting stepped on while groveling, dirty books, giving and receiving shoulder rides, being tyrannized by his girlfriend, cleaning up his junior’s room, cutting girls’ hair, taking baths together□”

“Hold on. Hold on, hold on, hold on, you’ve broken Koyomi Araragi’s spirit clean in two.”

Her logistics surpassed my expectations.

What a hopeless perv. The guy was better off dead.

Instead of cheering me on, she was making me want to stay in hell. Unless she turned it around at the end, I was going to have a hard time changing my mind after that onslaught.

I’m counting on ya, okay?

Or so I thought, but contrary to my hopes, Hachikuji capped off her long line with something of a fake-out□a simple, or from my perspective, an obvious liking. A natural preference.

“And living, didn’t he?”

But□it worked.

A simple fact, spoken simply.

It was all I needed. It sufficed.

I’d forgotten because it was so obvious.

Being on the verge of death again and again—all those narrow escapes made me forget something I'd always felt.

I was glad to be alive.

Enough to keep on living, and not as a humble act—no matter how masochistic or miserable I tried to look.

"You're right… I can't cherish young girls unless I'm alive."

"Erm, that isn't what I wanted to say, you realize."

I'd creeped Hachikuji out.

Despite her whole speech.

But yes, maybe it was true.

There being a heaven and a hell—didn't annul the point of living.

"I was worried that life would have no meaning?" I marveled. "Just being alive had meaning. Loving life was enough, since I could come to love so many things, so many people."

"That's open to misunderstanding, given the context."

"Hmm."

I adjusted my grip on the snake's tail.

Held it with both hands.

I looked at Tadatsuru, whom we'd kept waiting all this time. "Please tell me that I don't have to climb all the way? I'm pretty sure I don't have that kind of upper body strength."

"Don't worry. Remember what I said? No trial stands between you and your resurrection. I just need to give the signal, and Miss Gaen will pull you right up. Just cling to that snake's tail and don't let go—you only have one chance, though. Be careful your hands don't carelessly slip."

"If they did?" I was holding on along the scales, so now that he

mentioned it, it might be slippery…

“Who knows. I suppose you’d fall? For two thousand years, through flames so hold on tight with both hands, and whatever happens, don’t let go.”

“Okay… Sorry for all the trouble, and thanks, Tadatsuru Mister Tadatsuru.”

“No need to be respectful after all this time. It’s not as if I’ve relinquished my grudge against immortal aberrations. So long as you keep protecting Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade you’re my enemy.”

“…”

Still, I said. “Thanks for everything this time around… I never imagined I’d get to speak with you like this. If we ever have the chance, I hope we can chat in a more relaxed setting.”

“Sure, during a fight to the death.”

“Yeah… Hachikuji,” I said, turning toward her once again. “What’re you going to do now?”

“Excuse me?” She tilted her head, baffled. “You’re asking about me? This takes care of work, so once I see you off, I’m heading back to spending my days in children’s limbo stacking rocks.”

“Stacking rocks.”

“Ha ha ha. Please, I don’t need your sympathy. No, it isn’t fun, and honestly I don’t recall doing anything to deserve it. These rules about sin and punishment are far too inflexible, but then, I bear the guilt of having wandered for eleven years, even if that wasn’t something I did during my time as a human. I’ll accept my punishment to pay for that sin and I’ll pay up in full. Don’t worry, Jizo will come save me soon enough and I’ll transmigrate happily ever after.”

Pay up… But Hachikuji’s eleven years as a lost child wasn’t supposed to be subject to judgment. In fact, weren’t those years far

more like hell to a ten-year-old girl than children's limbo?

"Perhaps I'll be reborn as the baby you have with Miss Senjogahara."

"That'd be a heavy one."

"Oh, how heavy? More than ten pounds?"

"I'm not talking about your weight as a newborn…"

"But if you die before I'm reborn, Mister Araragi, let's play again here."

"Could you not assume I'm being sent to hell?"

Now that I had been once, it seemed like a done deal□but maybe knowing that you were going to end up in hell was some sort of encouragement to go on living.

"Well then," Hachikuji waved. "If I could, I'd send you off with a kiss like last time, but I'm not tall enough without Miss Ononoki around."

"How about not saying that here…"

Just look at Tadatsuru's dubious stare. He was doubting my character.

Not to cover anything up, but after all that dallying, I found myself nudging him on.

"I'm good. Send it whenever. That signal of yours. Send me along."

"Yes. Perhaps you'd have liked to learn more, but ask Miss Gaen to fill you in once you're back. I'm starting the countdown, then□Ten. Nine."

He'd brought a wooden Shinto wand out from somewhere; maybe it was part of his costume change. Swinging it back and forth, he counted down the seconds.

That made it feel more like a reverse bungee than a spider's thread dangling from heaven—should I wrap the snake around my waist instead of holding onto it? But a countdown could be interpreted as a form of purification.

"Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One… Ignition."

For whatever reason, the last part sounded like a rocket launch—in fact the approximate speed at which I was tugged straight into the air.

No kidding, my hands nearly slipped—as my feet left the ground.

It reminded me of Ononoki's Unlimited Rulebook. No, it was because I'd gotten used to her move to some degree that I could endure the shock of the liftoff.

I endured it.

And I think that's when my eyes met Hachikuji's.

"Ah."

She was seeing me off with a smile.

Satisfied, as though she'd accomplished something.

Her job. Wait—her job?

No booking fee, she'd told me.

Then word choice aside, she'd helped resuscitate me like this without any benefit to herself, despite not getting revived herself.

Right.

She said I deserved to be resurrected more than anyone else—and that's exactly what was happening, with her left by the wayside.

"H—"

Saying bye to Mayoi Hachikuji.

For how many times now?

“H□Hachikujiiiii!”

The moment I had that thought, my legs moved.

Both of them.

Not with any profound understanding or sharp read□I certainly wasn’t inspired by the story of the spider’s thread and wasn’t trying to turn it on its head.

If I have to say…

I had pretty long legs, that’s all.

“What? Eek, eeeek!”

Hachikuji screamed.

You would too, young girl or not, if you found your torso in a surprise leg scissor□especially if you were also getting caught up in a reverse bungee jump toward the high heavens.

And so□it was with my legs wrapped around a pigtailed girl wearing a large backpack that I was pulled into the sky. Almost instantly, Kita-Shirahebi Shrine and our town came into view, as if on an airplane map.

“Oh, Araragi, one last thing!”

A voice from the distant surface down below.

Tadatsuru’s□I couldn’t see him anymore, but somehow his voice alone reached me. Either he could project at a superhuman level, or it was some sort of half-human, half-spirit technique.

“One last thing from me! The enemy who requested that I slay a vampiric you alongside Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade□let me be the one to give you the name!”

I heard it.

Grasping a white snake with both hands and hugging a young girl with both legs, I heard the name. Strangely reverberating as if through the Doppler effect.

“Ogi□Ogi Oshino□”

012

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

My hands were too occupied to do any punching, of course, and as for epilogue—when I came to at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, the first thing I did was check my watch, and not even a minute had elapsed since I'd been sliced to pieces there by Miss Gaen.

March thirteenth.

Early morning, past seven.

"Really? You brought li'l Hachikuji back with you? What possessed you, her? Vastly exceeding my expectations as always, Koyomin. My plan was to have you stay out of the way if you managed to come back, so that you won't mess things up, but how can I not expect even more out of you now?"

I turned to face the familiar, aloof voice, and sure enough, it was the perpetrator of my murder, Izuko Gaen.

Yet her relaxed tone didn't reflect her state, which was far from halcyon—ten long claws, five from each hand, were to her neck.

Behind the smirking Miss Gaen, who sat cross-legged on the shrine stairs—prepared to rip out her windpipe at a moment's notice, was a tall and fair-skinned vampire.

With her blond hair and golden eyes, she was too beautiful for this world.

Long limbs extended from beneath her gorgeous dress.

An iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire.

The Aberration Slayer—a monster among monsters who had lived

for six hundred years.

Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade□in her complete form.

“Koyomin, wanna start off by asking this scary, pretty lady to put her claws away? I had her stay my execution under the condition that I’d bring you back to life no matter what…”

But wow, I never imagined the girl would get this angry□Miss Gaen said, composed despite her life-or-death crisis.

Shinobu□should I be calling her that now? Anyway, Shinobu also looked at me now that I was up.

“Hey. My lord,” she said with a supremely gruesome smile.

Right… If my vampiric nature had been fully “severed”□of course Shinobu Oshino would return to being a full vampire. We’d lost our link before, and we’d boosted our vampirism beyond the limit before□but seeing the complete Shinobu like this was impactful on another level.

This was no longer about our link via my shadow.

Our master-servant relationship itself had been severed.

She’d referred to me in the same way as always…but seeing Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade in her full form for just about the first time since spring break, I was quite nervous.

Nervous. Or maybe you could say tense.

“Ka□kakak. What, my lord? Why not play with my ribs as always?”

“No, that’d look way too weird…or rather, I don’t recall ever□”

“Hmph. Well, it seems no pointless killing or futile tearing was necessary. ’Twas my first time witnessing Yumewatari in operation…”

With that.

Shinobu withdrew her hands from Miss Gaen's throat.

She'd planned on killing her if I hadn't come back to life… I really couldn't let her run rampant.

Shinobu then took long strides toward me—almost like a model on a catwalk, and in a way that emphasized her chest.

"Fool. How dare ye worry me," she said, patting my head and smushing my hair. It might have been her first time doing the head-patting… "To think that after worrying me so, thou abducted a young girl from hell—'tis insane."

"N-No, I grabbed her instinctively…"

"Then thy instincts failed to counsel against grabbing a young girl more than anything in the world."

There was nothing I could say to that.

Then again, it wasn't grabbing but leg-scissoring, I thought, looking down at Hachikuji, who was still trapped tight. Apparently unable to endure the shock of the reverse bungee jump, she was out cold.

Weak as always in the face of adversity.

Or I should say, what've I done…

I'd brought her back from hell.

"Hey, Shinobu. This can't be good, right?"

"'Course not. But if thy plan is to turn thyself in, do it alone."

"Don't be so cold. And that's not what I mean. Won't this be enough for Hachikuji to activate the Darkness again?"

"I'm saying that was your highlight reel-worthy move, Koyomin."

With the two enchanted blades hanging from the belt on her waist—the look suited her, actually—Miss Gaen approached us.

"Originally, I'd sent you to the other side to remove your

vampirism, to purge the seat of your disease, and nothing more, but thanks to this miracle of yours we'll enjoy an advantage in the battle ahead. The lost young girl was a piece I wanted."

"…"

"Is 'a piece' rude? Don't get hung up on the word call her a weapon then, a weapon in our fight. I could not thank you enough… Now that we're in this situation, I'm going to have to ask you, Koyomin, as well as the no-longer-former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, and Mayoi, of course, for just a little bit more help. For now, though," Miss Gaen said, "why don't you go take your entrance exams?"

"E-Entrance exams…" Did she expect me to leap back into regular life from a shrine that was host to a vampire, a little ghost girl, and an expert wielding two swords?

"It's a student's duty to study, after all. Get going, and you'll make it in time. Do your best."

"W-Well yeah, of course."

I hadn't foreseen no time having passed at all on this side during my journey through hell… If I could still make it, there was only one thing to do: use every bit of academic ability drilled into me by Senjogahara and Hanekawa.

I couldn't say I was in good condition

But you go to war with the army you have.

"I'll put you on it starting tomorrow, Koyomin don't you worry, it'll be over by graduation day. We've got all the weapons we need. We were getting owned before today, but the preparations are in place at last. Let's end this, Koyomin and what do you know, tomorrow's White Day. Perfect for ending this tale of a town a white snake once reigned over."

Miss Gaen spoke with an uncharacteristically aggressive smile on her lips.

“It’s counterattack time, kiddos.”

CHAPTER SIX
HITAGI RENDEZ-VOUS

HITAGI SENJOGAHARA

001

I love Hitagi Senjogahara. I can say that brazenly. Why? Because it's true. No other words needed, no other reasoning—the feeling's so clear it feels foolish to explain it in detail.

A year ago, though, the idea that I'd ever feel that way about anyone never crossed my mind—it would've been even harder to believe than the existence of vampires and hell. To go further, harder to tolerate.

The concept of a me in love with someone felt phonier than any urban legend.

Coming to like someone.

Loving someone—I was afraid of it.

At the risk of being misunderstood, you could even say I avoided putting myself in that situation. I'm still awful at building relationships with other people, but if we were to describe it as an intentional, continued avoidance of other human beings on my part, I'd done a pretty good job of it.

If you went on to ask why I was such a coward about love, that one's simple. I saw myself as precious—and feared no longer being that precious person.

I was afraid of changing.

And of being changed.

I think that's what it was—and still don't feel differently, I ought to let you know.

In my understanding, that's what it means to become involved with another human being—whether it's loving someone or hating

someone.

Letting go of self-love is the condition.

Or else you won't love anyone but yourself.

Hitagi Senjogahara seems to believe this even more than I do□and I think that's fine.

Her love is probably…too heavy a thing to be directed at herself alone.

Splitting it with me seems just right.

If you aren't prepared to lift something on your own, you won't even with another person, they say, and her love needs to be shared with that understanding.

But that image makes me wonder.

I love Hitagi Senjogahara.

I can say it brazenly, but for all that I can.

Did my self-love abandon me somewhere along the way? Am I loving myself the way I love her?

Because if I'm not.

I might as well be dead.

002

“I’ll go on a date.”

So said Hitagi Senjogahara—okay, that’s a pretty abrupt way to begin a story, and maybe you don’t follow. Let me add a little more in the way of stage directions.

The date was March thirteenth.

In other words, the evening of the day I was doomed to an eternity in hell on account of my actions before immediately reviving on account of my doings—and also the evening after taking the entrance exams for my first-choice school in an exhausted condition (top condition, I’d insist if I were my little sister Karen) and coming out of it thinking, At least I filled in the whole answer sheet! Dead tired from my first time undergoing the rite since I got into Naoetsu High, I returned home so spent that being sent back to hell might have been preferable—to find Hitagi Senjogahara waiting in front of the Araragi residence.

My girlfriend.

By the way, it wasn’t my first time seeing her that day—I’d been with her that morning too. Or rather, she escorted me to my first-choice school like a Secret Service agent so I wouldn’t get caught up in any unnecessary trouble. She’d kept her right arm in her pocket the whole way, not because she carried a weapon there, I hope… Well, before she joined me as my bodyguard, I’d gotten caught up in the unthinkable bit of trouble that was being sliced to pieces by Miss Gaen, but thanks to Senjogahara’s presence, or maybe not, I didn’t get into any further trouble—as I said, I at least managed to fill in the whole answer sheet.

She, along with Hanekawa, had supported my studies for the last year or so, in fact. On a fundamental level, as someone whose

catchphrase used to be I just need to graduate, ninety percent of my motivation when it came to my exams was attending the same college as my girlfriend Senjogahara—it wouldn't be brown-nosing at all if I said I'd taken that test thanks to her.

So no matter how tired I felt, no matter how defeated my psyche, I planned to call her as soon as I got home—to my surprise, however, she was right there as if she'd anticipated my move, like she had a head start.

I learned later that she'd felt like Hachiko the faithful dog, but from my point of view, she was a bandit waiting to ambush me. I mean, whatever your angle, the glare in her eyes was saying, "You're back, bastard," and not "Good job, Araragi!" You can't blame me if I faltered in front of my own home.

What could it be? Did she somehow find out that I'd gone to hell that morning? Did Miss Gaen tweet about it (I could see her having an account)? I hadn't told her because I didn't want her to worry, or rather because I knew it'd make her mad, and put it off to after my exams… Maybe her stern expression made sense. Finding out your boyfriend went to hell has to be pretty shocking.

I braced myself.

Just one more battle…

Determined, cautiously piecing together my plan to vindicate myself, which is to say apologize, I approached Senjogahara, only for her to speak in a tone as stern as her expression.

What was once her standard tone, a flat delivery that knew neither intonation nor accent.

"I'll go on a date," she said.

I'd heard those words before.

Yes, the move she'd made back in June when we went on our first date—

"No, that's not it," she continued, which was again a perfect replay

as far as I remembered.

“I-It’s not?” I replied, confused.

My reaction just as fresh and innocent.

How adorable, Araragi!

“Well,” she said, “it’s been so long since I had a proper appearance that I lost track of my personality.”

“…”

Don’t be sounding like Ononoki. That girl’s a rare type of side character who loses track of her characterization even when she has plenty of appearances…

Which is better, I wonder—a side character with lots of screen time, or a principal character without any?

“What sort of person was I, again?”

“That line’s a lot to take in…”

“I want to say a cool, beautiful woman who waves around staplers and paper cutters.”

“If you’re going that far back, I need to devise an approach and plan for a tougher trial than the exams I just took…”

Having mentioned them, I fully expected her to respond, “Oh, so how was it? Do you think you did well?”—since there’d be no point in beating myself up anymore, I’d answer “I did what I could” and thank her, or so the simulation in my mind went, but that wasn’t the direction our conversation headed in.

She rephrased herself as if she didn’t even know about my exams:

“Date me or else.”

Her tone had changed—it was even more stern. She wasn’t this tyrannical even back when she hadn’t turned over a new leaf and

was still a character who swung around staplers and paper cutters.

Date me or else?

That was just a threat.

“I-Isn’t your characterization straying, Miss Senjogahara?”

“Tomorrow.”

My retort, or my offer to interpret my girlfriend’s bizarre and incomprehensible statement as a joke, my blurring of her wording, was flatly ignored and nullified.

Tomorrow, she said.

“Tomorrow, we’ll make full use of the day on a half-year’s worth of dates, Araragi□do you understand what I’m saying?”

“No, sorry, haven’t got a clue…”

Despite being lovers, our minds were far from one□she was still a difficult individual and partner.

That did mean I never got tired of chatting with her, so maybe I should accept it with open arms. In certain tense situations, though, it was a negative and an accident risk.

“Then I’ll provide commentary,” she said, “like on the alternate audio track.”

“…”

I didn’t know much about those, having not been a part of many, but the word was that the audio commentary didn’t do much to explain what’s going on in the main story…

And in terms of commentary, right now I wanted some on those exam problems□but things hadn’t cooled off to a point where I could ask her.

Though in fact, it felt ice cold.

It was March, but still chilly out…

Then Senjogahara continued as if she hadn't forgotten at all about my exams.

"First off, good job, Araragi," she appreciated my effort at last. But the appreciation seemed a bit sarcastic, almost as if she was mad… "You worked so hard that even if you're left empty-handed, you have nothing to be ashamed of. You've already succeeded."

"Could you not make it sound like it's a given that I won't make it in? That's consolation, not appreciation. Don't foreshadow a situation where I need to be soothed. I haven't said anything yet, have I? It's not over until the results are in."

"It's over already," she insisted.

She'd decided on a direction, and nothing I said could change our course□I guess I just had to sit back and watch.

When there's no point in saying anything, you should stay quiet.

"Your battle ends here."

"…"

"And so, after six months of self-control, I want us to begin dating anew. I'm spending all the points I've saved up. And what do you know, tomorrow is March fourteenth, White Day. The perfect special day for a date."

"…"

"Did you just think about how much you hate special days?"

How did she figure that out when I was silent? What a unilateral unspoken connection.

But with this, my frazzled mind finally caught a glimpse of her point□so that's what.

She hadn't blurted out anything outrageous□in fact, she'd

petitioned me with a very proper request.

While doing so on the heels of my exams betrayed what you might call her unreconstructed agility—she was right, we'd been dating since last May, and we'd spent a lot of time together as home tutor and pupil or whatever, but only gone on a few dates you could actually call dates. Not only that, the majority were during first term, and to get into shocking specifics, we hadn't gone on a single one since I'd gotten serious about my exams. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that after second term, we were quite the stoic couple for two high school students.

Yes, so despite spending a lot of time with her in her capacity as my tutor or what have you, whether at school or at home—we never once went somewhere to go have fun, on a trip, or the like.

I prepared for exams, and she instructed her pathetic boyfriend-cum-pupil, forcing us both to abstain—moreover, since the middle part of second term, Sengoku's case put both my life and Senjogahara's in extreme danger for an extended period of time, which wasn't conducive to seeking anything like a date.

As soon as the state of emergency lifted (thanks to a disagreeable conman), my body began growing vampiric on its own… The deluge of troubles had left me unable to come up for air; studying for exams had left me with no time to take a breather.

"Graduation is the day after tomorrow," Senjogahara said. "In other words, our glorious lives as high school students would come to an end having barely gone on any dates—isn't that sad?"

"Well, if you put it that way…"

"We had most of third term off from school, too. It went by so fast. I can see why they say that January jumps away, February flies, and March marches on."

"You're right. Third term did end in the blink of an eye."

"I can see why they say that April absconds, May makes a break, June jumps, July jogs, August ain't long, September stirs, October

outruns, November is not long for this world, and December is like a sled pulled by reindeer.”

“Hey, you cheated there at the end!”

“How will we ever tell the daughter we’ll have one day that despite dating in high school, we graduated having barely done anything that lovers do?”

“That’s a heavy question. A daughter?”

“Huh, you’d prefer a boy?”

“This isn’t about gender.”

“But I’ve already decided on a name.”

“Now it’s actually getting heavy…” So weighty, you’d never imagine she once struggled with having no weight at all. “You know, I think I’ll ask. What’s the name?”

“Tsubasa.”

“Too heavy too heavy too heavy too heavy!”

And Hanekawa would agree! Cherish your friendship with other girls some other way!

“So,” a nonchalant Senjogahara put us back on topic—a move that was so uniquely her. “We’re spending all of tomorrow to have an entire half-year’s worth of dates—an abridged edition, in other words. A recap episode of our time in high school.”

“A recap episode…” How do you recap something that hasn’t aired yet? I took her meaning, though. Simply put, now that my exams were done, she wanted to go on all the dates we’d missed, and why not do it tomorrow, on White Day.

“I’ve got the scoop, Araragi.”

“…What?”

My what wasn't asking "what scoop?" so much as "what's with that phrasing," but Senjogahara seemed to interpret it as the former.

"It seems you're back in good health," she elaborated.

"Oh, er…"

It took me a moment, but not long, to understand what she meant: my transformation into a vampire, which should have been irreversible, and having returned as a human after going to hell.

I knew this, of course, since it was my own body.

But how did Senjogahara?

"Well, in the mirrors at the street corners and such as I walked you to the college campus, you had a reflection."

What a sharp girl.

I'd kept quiet about it, thinking I'd explain later. For her part, she hadn't said anything or grilled me because it wasn't appropriate when I was just about to take my exams□both of us were surprisingly considerate people.

"In other words, your outstanding problems, be it your exams or your body, have been taken care of. They've come to an end, right? Then there's no reason for you not to go on a date with me. There's no better time to resolve our undatedness."

"Undatedness…"

She had such a knack for coining and using awkward words.

Still, even if those two outstanding problems had come to an end… No. That was neither here nor there.

It wasn't about having no reason not to□I wanted to go on a date as much as she did. I'd been repressing myself despite being a healthy young high schooler and wanted to go on one asap.

Okay, if she actually asked to go right now, I might beg her to let

me rest for the day (not only was I exhausted, I lacked any vampirism and my stamina recovery was notably sluggish—or rather, like a normal person's), but honestly, if it was tomorrow, which is to say after a good night's rest, I'd happily go anywhere with her.

There was Miss Gaen.

There was Miss Kagenui.

There was Hachikuji.

There was Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

And—there was her.

In fact, I had all sorts of concerns I needed to think about, and maybe I also needed to be acting like an exam-taker until I received my results, the way a school trip isn't over until you get home.

Still, I wanted to value our desire to do high school things while we were high schoolers. In which case, I couldn't stand around and hesitate forever—I needed to man up and respond to her feelings.

"And so, Araragi, you'll go on a date with me," Senjogahara propositioned once more, as if she'd finally remembered the correct phrasing—not that it was at all correct, but it reminded me of the days when we first started going out, and I felt a little high.

"If you don't go on a date with me, I'll bite off my own tongue as we speak."

"…"

Or a little down.

"You'll never be able to French kiss me again," she warned.

"That'd be the least of our worries if you bit your tongue off…"

Of course, it would've been my tongue being threatened in the past. When I thought of it that way, what a harmless cute thing

Senjogahara had become.

Well, she'd done more than simply mellow out—I guess neither she nor I had stood still.

We needed to graduate.

To move forward.

I did hate arbitrary special days but would make an exception for tomorrow and not say that. It was likely to be my last date as a high school student, so I might as well allow myself to act like a high schooler.

"All right," I said. "It won't be a recap, we'll be capping it off—we're spending tomorrow to the fullest to have a half-year's worth of dates."

"Oh, sorry, I don't know about the fullest part. I have plans that night."

Slump—I almost did a pratfall.

"So let's start early in the morning and go to about the evening. Don't worry, I already have it all planned up here," Senjogahara said, tapping her temple. The gesture made her look smart, but I felt a tinge of anxiety over a date mapped out by her.

I mean, the way our first date turned out… Still, I couldn't trample on her feelings by asking for an immediate review. I just had to hope she'd become harmless on this point too.

Okay. In that case, my plans for tomorrow night were good, too. Yup, I'd be sticking to them.

"Copy that, I hear you loud and clear. By the way," I threw out what I thought was a casual question, "what is it you need to do tomorrow night?"

"Well, it's White Day," she restated the obvious. "I'm having dinner with my dad."

“…”

Just another regrettably heavy reply from her that I needed to take in.

003

“A date? Tomorrow? Hold on, you need to report this kind of thing sooner. This is really sudden. I have plans of my own, okay? Oh, fine, I’ll figure out a way to make some time. Anything for you, kind monster sir.”

“Wait, why are you acting like you’ve been invited? What kind of position are you in, here?”

After seeing Senjogahara off, I at last entered the Araragi residence and dragged myself up to my room on the second floor only to find yet another individual waiting for me: the lodger and current freeloader in my home, Yotsugi Ononoki, the shikigami tween.

Being a doll, she was supposed to be staying under the guise of being my little sister’s stuffed toy, but as of late she was moving around more or less for all to see. Today was no exception—she’d come on her own to my room and made herself comfortable on my bed, even reading a manga I’d bought before me.

Make some time? She looked like the world’s most idle tween.

There was some strange woman outside the house, but I left her alone because it seemed like she was waiting for you, monstieur. Who was she? asked Ononoki, and I replied with the plain truth—but actually, if she saw a strange woman outside our home, the familiar should’ve checked it out, having been placed with me by her master Miss Kagenui to be my personal bodyguard.

In fact, I needed to tell Ononoki a lot of things—it didn’t make sense to be leading off with a report that I’d booked a date.

What should I tell her, though, and how much? Miss Gaen didn’t seem too interested in keeping me quiet, and Tadatsuru even wanted me to apologize to her in his place… But could it hinder

whatever plans Miss Gaen was putting together if I revealed everything about my morning trip through hell? I couldn't let go of that concern, but I also felt that Ononoki needed to know about what happened with Tadatsuru, given her involvement. What to do…

"What's the matter, kind monster sir, monstieur for short? You're staring at my face. Are you admiring it? Do I look all dolled up? You know, being a doll and all."

"Well, it's just…" I made up my mind, then spoke before the tween could say anything too amusing. Even if it didn't clear things up, I needed to settle what I could before my date tomorrow. "Ononoki. I want to talk about something serious, is that okay?"

"I'm always serious. I've never talked about anything unserious. I'm so serious, they call me the brightest star."

Despite saying this with a deadpan look and tone, I picked up nothing earnest about her words, not to mention the disqualifying pun□it sounded like an utter lie anyway, but ignoring that, I briefly gave her the highlights of my adventure that morning, beginning with my trip to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. I tried to be mindful of the fact that I'd be talking for way too long if I told her everything, but the story wrapped up quicker than I thought when I actually summarized it.

It felt like a two-thousand-year journey to me, but it did in fact all happen in a flash. Maybe that's how describing stuff goes□your emotional attachment to the events says nothing about their length.

"Huh."

On top of that, Ononoki barely reacted. What an unrewarding listener to recount your adventures to.

"You're telling stories to a stuffed toy and expecting it to be rewarding? My only reaction is annoyance that you got yourself in trouble as soon as I let you off the leash."

"Hold on, even hearing all that about Tadatsuru, one of your

creators, doesn't do anything for you? He told me to say hi to you."

"Not in particular. I've told you, haven't I? Don't expect human emotions from me. Whether he was dead from the start, or immortal in a way, or a living doll, it doesn't change the meaning of what I did," Ononoki shrugged. "As in, what it means to you, monstieur."

"…"

"I'm sure you have your own thoughts on the matter, and maybe you feel redeemed. But if I had to come up with some sort of opinion…personally, I guess it just sounds fishy."

"Fishy? Like how?" I never quite agreed with the nuances of fishy (what's wrong with fish?) but of course knew they were negative. Ononoki's expressions were so deadpan, which is to say impossible to read, and conversing with her demanded a high level of communication skills.

"In no particular way. I just wonder how much of it went as Miss Gaen planned. Most of my dealings with her have been through Big Sis, so I've no clue how calculating she is or isn't… Maybe even bringing Hatchy back with you was part of her plan, and she only pretended to be surprised."

"Hatchy…" Why was everyone getting influenced by the audio commentary? Having fun behind my back, are you?

"Well, to be blunt, there's more audio commentaries at this point than books."

"Stop. No one asked you to be blunt."

"I don't believe in hell anyway… Are you sure it wasn't a hallucination you had while you were on the verge of death?"

"A hallucination? Like a near-death experience? But□"

"A hallucination Miss Gaen made you have or something. Kinda scary to think about."

“…”

It was kinda scary, true… But why was this doll going out of her way to scare me? Did she get a kick out of frightening me, or what?

“Come on,” she said. “Frightened people are fun to watch, in general.”

“You’re terrible. Cut it out, you’re gonna make me mad.”

“Nothing’s more fun than making people mad. So exciting. Whenever people lecture me it’s like, whoa, this guy’s so mad, he’s totally lost control! I put on a meek look, but am all smiles inside.”

“Well, I’m genuinely sorry I was about to get mad at you!”

Not that she ever looked meek or smiling.

Forget about deadpan, her expression was rigor mortis.

What a troublesome kid—though I was sure she’d only enjoy it if I looked troubled.

“Anyway,” Ononoki said, “the flip side is that hearing that I might meet Tadatsuru again someday doesn’t bother me. So thanks for the info.”

“Oh… Well, that makes it feel worthwhile.”

“You died for a noble cause.”

“Now I’m not so sure.”

“But that’s not what matters to me,” Ononoki changed the subject—and perhaps she was right. If we were going to talk about Tadatsuru, one of her creators, we also had to discuss another: Miss Kagenui, her master as a shikigami.

Whose whereabouts were currently unknown.

She wasn’t even in hell—not that it helped brighten the mood, or so I assumed Ononoki felt. I was way off.

“Tell me more about Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade’s complete recovery,” Ononoki said. “The issue has a direct bearing on my safety.”

“…”

“I bathed her in verbal abuse because she was a little girl, the dregs of her former self, but I need to change my tune drastically if she’s complete again. Please teach me how to speak to others in a respectful manner, monstieur?”

A-ha!

Okay, she was right about the joys of watching someone fret□all the more so when it was a cheeky shikigami tween.

“Might your mistress Heartunderblade be listening to us now from your shadow?”

“I’m not sure that came out right.”

She really didn’t know how to address people with respect.

But she wanted to know if Shinobu was in my shadow□and minor linguistic errors are fine as long as you get your point across.

In other words, I was no longer preparing for exams.

“Nope, she isn’t,” I replied. Sure, I wanted to watch her fret for a little longer, but bullying her wouldn’t get me anywhere. “Shinobu is with Miss Gaen, along with Hachikuji. They’re having a meeting about what to do next, or maybe a discussion.”

“Maybe a destination.”

“Okay, now you’re just getting the meaning of words wrong. Could you please keep your mistakes to respectful language?”

“I’m pretty sure I know what I’m talking about. They’re talking about our fate.”

“You mean our destiny.” Or our destino, which can mean both□I

learned that over the course of my exam prep, and it seemed useless at the time, but I guess not.

“I wonder what’s next for us. You turned back into a regular boy at last, but are you gonna keep going? Even if you’re dancing in the palm of Miss Gaen’s hands?”

“Um, I don’t think I gave a clear answer one way or another…”

But.

I felt like I couldn’t stick my head in the sand and play dumb now—regardless of what happened next, I needed a helping hand from Miss Gaen to take care of Hachikuji and Shinobu’s problems. And she didn’t allow debts to remain unpaid—any reimbursement I could make now, I needed to attend to.

“And there’s Miss Kagenui,” I had no choice but to nervously bring up the name since Ononoki was refusing to.

I could be so considerate sometimes…

Yeah, I was showing consideration to a doll, but I couldn’t remain indifferent about Miss Kagenui. In fact, I was most interested.

Yozuru Kagenui.

And—where was Mèmè Oshino?

“Well, isn’t he just living like a vagrant as always? That’s what I think,” Ononoki said.

“I feel like the time to be that easygoing about his situation has passed… I mean, we’ve been looking and looking for him and still don’t know where he is. You realize that Hanekawa, of all people, can’t find him.”

“Ah, yes. The girl who dozen snow everything.”

“It’s doesn’t know everything.”

“She’s not a professional bounty hunter, okay? But how you view

her is none of my business… As far as Big Sis goes, I assume she's off on a journey to perfect her martial skills."

And with that, Ononoki tried to go back to reading my manga.

She knew she couldn't end the conversation like that, right?

No one could be that nil admirari.

She'd grown way too uninterested the moment she learned that Shinobu wasn't present□but in her prime, Kissshot could travel anywhere in the world at a moment's notice, in essence teleporting for goodness' sake.

"Listen, I'm a free spirit," Ononoki said. "I can't do anything without instructions from Big Sis, so I can't help out with whatever you do next. Just keep that in mind."

"…"

Geez, I knew that without being told, why say it in such an aggravating way?

"But if you insist, I could join you on your date tomorrow."

"Why are you so interested in coming along? Stop trying to block the path of Cupid's arrows. This is going to be my first laidback episode in a while." Okay, I was hoping for one, but let's be real, it was going to be produced by Hitagi Senjogahara…

"Whaaat? But other people's dates are such a riot. Nothing dumber than someone else's romantic relationship."

"I can't lay into you because my little sisters are unmistakably to blame for your character just now…" Having yet another person in my life with that kind of a personality wasn't so much rough, as sad□how badly did I mess up as an older brother for them to turn out that way? Both of them, but the littler little sister, Ononoki's current owner, seemed to be getting worse by the day.

"I mean, isn't it amusing to watch people getting worked up about something that everyone else just finds hilarious? Nothing gets me

more excited than that ‘you might be serious about it, but you know I don’t give a damn!’ feeling.”

“As someone tasked by Miss Kagenui with taking care of you, I’m starting to think I need to separate you from my sisters as soon as humanly possible… But Ononoki. Does a girl like you ever feel serious about anything?”

As an expert on immortal aberrations, Miss Kagenui approached their extermination with a pretty serious air. You might assume the same of Ononoki, who acted alongside her master, but that couldn’t be what really motivated her when she was an immortal aberration herself.

In which case, what did make her serious?

“Isn’t there anything you want to do, or want to have?” I asked.

“No way.”

“How about just ‘no’?”

“I’m just a combat machine that fights as Big Sis tells me to. Aren’t you keenly aware of that already?” replied Ononoki, without even looking up from my manga. It really did feel like dealing with my little sisters… “You’re asking a mug which makes it happier, coffee getting poured into it or tea.”

“…”

Was it just me, or was she bad at coming up with examples? I got what she was saying, but it was a little confusing.

“Anyway, I’m immersing myself in the arts this time around, far away from your mundane affairs. Go ahead and dance away, monstieur. Whether it’s on Miss Gaen’s hand or someone else’s.”

“I’m not trying to drag you into it, personally…” But regarding a different matter, I indeed was curious what her intentions were, or if dolls have no intentions, then what her function was. “In any case, Ononoki, what’re you going to do if Miss Kagenui never comes back if she never picks you up?”

The question was cruel in a way, and asking it did pain me. It had to be asked, though. Yet Ononoki herself, stone-faced, deadpanned, “In that case□I suppose I’ll just have to spend the rest of my life here. If you get married and leave, I’ll follow you, of course.”

“You need to come up with a more realistic life plan than that. What do you mean, ‘of course’?”

“Would you have preferred an ‘or else’?”

She turned around threateningly, but her face remained blank□what a surreal image.

It was such a shame that she looked so emotionless even when she pulled off excellent reactions. Save the poker face for the poker table.

“My current mission is to monitor you, though… I can’t leave you until it’s rescinded. In other words, if Big Sis doesn’t come back, you and I will be a couple for the rest of our lives.”

“The rest of our lives?”

“Hey, could you not act so freaked out? I’m the one who’s suffering thanks to this mission. I feel like I’ve been locked in a cage with a wild animal.”

“I feel the exact same way… We’re of like minds, huh?”

We needed Miss Kagenui to return as soon as possible□yeah, I couldn’t hope for this situation to last forever. For the sake of my own future too.

“By the way, monstieur. By the by the way, monstieur. How did that test-taking business of yours go? I’ve been pretty concerned, you know.”

“You have been? Me, I’m a little concerned by your condescending tone, but I guess I appreciate the concern?” After all, Senjogahara ended up leaving without so much as touching on my test performance, and I didn’t know if that signaled trust. “Well, I did everything I could. I appreciate all the support you gave me.”

She was the first person to hear these words from me for some reason, when it should have been Senjogahara and Hanekawa□but I guess Ononoki did feel concerned about me, a test-taker living under the same roof. I wasn't wrong to express my gratitude.

"You're welcome. Okay…in that case, why don't we get straight to checking your answers? Try telling me what kinds of questions you got. I'll double-check them for you."

"…"

As if she could.

Expertise was one thing, but sorry, academically she must be a twelve year old just like her appearance suggested.

"The material you were tested on won't stick with you unless you double-check your answers the same day."

"I bet that's just something you heard, don't pass it off as your own advice…"

"You need to start preparing for next year as soon as possible."

"You're also assuming I'll have to retake my exams."

She was getting in on this too?

I can take care of myself.

"But really, how did it go? Weren't you in pretty bad shape after going through a massive trip through hell in the morning?"

"I won't deny that, but we'll say it's a miracle that I managed to take them at all."

"You make it sound like the experience alone was worth it□you know they aren't free, right? Try not to cause too much trouble for your mom and dad."

"Scolding me on my parents' behalf? You? Anyway, I know it might sound like I'm bragging, but I feel pretty confident. Even outside of

math, to some degree…”

“Hmm.”

“Well, it’d be pretty awful if I came out empty-handed despite a setup as blessed as Senjogahara and Hanekawa looking after me… I feel like I did a good enough job not to get any mud on their faces.”

“I have to say, though□mud wrestling is delightful. When do you get your results again? Before or after graduation?”

“After.”

“Okay. Then maybe hurry up and go on that date. It’d be awkward if one of you didn’t make it in.”

Nah, that wasn’t why Senjogahara picked tomorrow for our date…

“Oh, because it’s White Day? You took an excuse like that at face value?”

“How’s that an excuse? If anything, she’s being sincere.”

“True, any girl sincerely wants to be repaid threefold.”

“Threefold? Oh. I guess that’s the custom.”

As someone who didn’t care for special events, I didn’t know much about the details of White Day□but yes, I’d received chocolates from Senjogahara a month ago, on Valentine’s Day.

Threefold…

A pretty impressive interest rate for just a month when you thought about it, but if those were the rules, I wasn’t flouting them□I didn’t have that kind of spine. What did I need to buy to be ready for tomorrow, though?

“Remind me… Do I just need to give candy and marshmallows and stuff?”

“I’m fine with ice cream.”

“You didn’t give me any chocolate last month. Triple of nothing is still nothing.”

“Are you sure? Have you proven it?”

“Um.” When you phrased it that way, it was the math-lover’s sad fate to feel momentarily uncertain.

Not that I needed to prove it. The answer was obviously zero.

“We’re meeting tomorrow morning, so if I’m going to buy her something, I need to go shopping today… I’m really tired, though. I’d like to rest.”

“Right. And I’m occupying your bed, you poor thing.”

“Not an issue, I can always move you by force… What should I do, though□maybe I’ll ask my little sisters?”

“Wouldn’t they lack your heartfelt emotion? I think presents are something you need to pick yourself.”

“Hm, can’t argue with that…”

If anything, I should have prepared sooner for an important event like White Day, but it was Senjogahara who’d been telling me to give my undivided attention to test prep□she’d been freed after summer break, but I guess the last few months had been ascetic for her too.

It made me want to be that much more thoughtful about my return gift□let’s see.

“I don’t need to be so hung up on the candy part, right? This isn’t Halloween.”

“No, but be very hung up when it comes to ice cream. As opposed to frozen yogurt.”

“That’s just what you want.”

“Can you believe that Haagen-Dazs is closing all its stores here? The

cups are fine, but where am I going to get cones that taste that good?"

"I don't know… Somewhere that isn't Japan?"

By the way, how did Halloween suddenly become so ubiquitous in our country? Perhaps people like Oshino, who cared much more about those kinds of yearly rituals, saw it as a reason to celebrate.

In any case, asking Ononoki for advice didn't seem very productive, and I was beginning to wonder which of the forty-eight sumo techniques I should use to toss her off my bed, when she fell flat all of a sudden.

Letting go of the manga in her hands and slumping, sinking into the bed with her face down and limbs splayed, as if her batteries had run out.

Almost like an invisible enemy had landed a powerful shot to her chin—I'd been thinking sumo, but had she been boxing with an unseen foe?

No, of course not. As a shikigami aberration, her senses were hundreds of times sharper than a regular human's—which is to say my own at that moment in time. She simply noticed that someone was approaching the room before I ever could.

In other words, she'd entered stuffed-toy mode.

A moment later.

"Big brother!"

Kicking my door open and bursting into my room like some special-forces unit was—my littler little sister, in fact. Namely Tsukihi Araragi.

A girl with the longest of hair who was wearing Japanese clothes.

Her hair so terrifyingly long that she looked like a yokai after a bath—if she wasn't careful, she could trip on it.

“You took my doll out of my room again, didn’t you?! Oh, there she is! I knew it! You need to stop going into other people’s rooms without asking!” said the enraged girl, who’d just entered my room without asking—and while it’s not like I never enter my little sisters’ room without asking, in this case it was the doll who’d perpetrated an unauthorized entry.

As for Ononoki, she was committed to the stuffed-toy act.

She’d fallen to her face in a position that no body with a will could manage.

“You even put her on your bed? I hope you didn’t do anything weird with my precious doll.”

“You could say I was being hospitable…”

“I’m not big on stuffed animals, but I feel a sense of sympathy with that one for whatever reason. That’s why I keep on telling you that you’re not allowed to take her out of my room.”

“Sympathy, huh?”

Then again, knowing something about my sister that she herself didn’t, I had to admit that Tsukihi Araragi and Yotsugi Ononoki did have a connection. I could only praise my little sister’s instincts if she felt that way about her doll.

Of course, though Tsukihi had forgotten about it, Ononoki had come to kill her once. If her instincts were going to kick into action, they needed to run in the opposite direction instead.

“Still, Tsukihi, if you’re calling it yours and really care that much about this doll, why not give it a name?”

“Hm? Oh, no. If I gave her a name, I’d get attached to her and might hesitate when it’s time to throw her away. If you feel sympathy for someone, what you need to be thinking about is what you’ll do once that sympathy runs out.”

“…”

I couldn't believe this little sister of mine…

Ononoki was expressionless to begin with, and now she was in stuffed-toy mode on top of that. I couldn't tell what went through her mind, but I thought she looked appalled by her owner Tsukihi's mindset.

I could've been projecting, of course…

"When that day comes, though," my sister offered, "I'd be happy to give her to you as a hand-me-down instead of throwing her out."

"A hand-me-down? You'd be handing her up to me…"

"So you were back," the recently irate Tsukihi observed, calm all of a sudden—the intensity of her mood swings gave her a one-of-a-kind personality… "Now that your exams are over, you can have all the fun you want! You're gonna be a college student starting next month! This calls for a celebration! I'll start getting ready for one! I'll get all the middle school girls in the area together for a party tonight!"

"How positive of you…"

Surprisingly enough, my little sister had more faith in my test-taking abilities than anyone else—but a party with every middle school girl in the area could wait, given the incalculable amount of damage it'd do to me in the off-chance that I didn't get in.

"And Karen's going to be a high schooler next month too. I'm going to feel left behind, all on my own. Maybe I'll go ahead and skip a grade!"

"Is it that easy to skip a grade?"

In fact, Japan didn't let you skip grades, as far as I knew.

Maybe with Tsukihi's academics, though.

"Joking aside, what do you say? Why don't we have a full day of fun tomorrow, celebrating you and Karen's start at new schools? It's been so long since we've done something like that with just the

three of us.”

“Hm. Not a bad suggestion, but sadly I have a prior engagement tomorrow.” A prior engagement that had only come to be thirty minutes ago. “But if you want to do something this month, I wouldn’t mind making some time.”

I’d caught Ononoki’s haughty speech.

The idea of speaking to Tsukihi in a way influenced by Ononoki, who herself was strongly influenced by Tsukihi, made for an Ouroboros-like image.

“Hey, you sound so relaxed now,” she said nevertheless. “Until pretty recently, you’d punch your little sister if she came up and asked you to go play.”

“I was that rough of a brother?!”

I didn’t remember anything like that.

True, I wasn’t on as bad of terms with my little sisters as I’d been in the past□perhaps both people and your relationships with others never stay the same?

Especially over the last year. So much had happened.

Yes□with Karen, and with Tsukihi.

Tsukihi in particular, during summer break…I thought as I turned to Ononoki, but she lay there on the bed like a corpse.

Well, she actually was a corpse.

“Okay, then we’ll go somewhere this month,” Tsukihi said.

“Sure. I’ll leave the planning up to you,” I let the moment carry me away. Entrusting her with plans to have fun made me about as anxious as entrusting Senjogahara to come up with a date plan□there was something alike in the two, after all.

“Broadly speaking, which would you rather go to? The mountains

or the sea?”

“I’d like to go to a mountain in the sea.”

“What, like the Castle of the Undersea Devil?” she shot back, not missing a beat. “I see. But you’re going on a date with Miss Senjogahara tomorrow? I’m so jealous, you’re such a passionate couple. Me and Rosokuzawa have been dating so long that things between us have quieted down. I mean, I invited him to go somewhere on White Day and he ended up vaguely turning me down.”

“…”

It seemed like only a matter of time before my little sister broke up with him. Vaguely? What a pathetic kid.

“Wait, did I ever say my plans were with Senjogahara?”

“You didn’t have to. Plans on March fourteenth? It has to be either your girlfriend or Einstein.”

“It’d be a huge deal if it was Einstein. People would start celebrating that on the fourteenth instead of White Day. Though I’d love to chat with him if we could…”

The story is that Einstein’s last words were in German, and his nurse didn’t understand what he said. I doubted the likes of me could keep up a conversation even if language wasn’t a problem, though.

Thinking that Oikura’s choice would probably be Euler, I continued, “Well, you’re right. I guess I want you to tell me…to ask you what’d make you happy if you got it as a White Day gift.”

“Some loving, caring cash.”

“…”

Greedy little sister.

She wasn’t any help. And it wasn’t some appetizer of a joke

preceding her real answer, but the main course itself, served from the heart, because Tsukihi switched topics.

“Okay, then. In that case, I’ll pay Nadeko a visit tomorrow to see how she’s doing. She’s out of the hospital now, but still recovering at home. She said she’ll start going to school once the new term starts. She must be lonely stuck at home all by herself, so I’ll head over and make some noise!”

“You’ve been visiting her a lot, haven’t you,” I replied point-blank. It was my honest thought. “Frankly, I’m surprised. I knew you and Sengoku were friends, but I never thought you two were that close.”

“You’re wrong! We’re best friends!”

Tsukihi snickered, showing no signs of being serious, but it seemed pretty clear that Sengoku had her to thank for somehow finding her way back into society after everything that happened.

The conman wasn’t to thank for it. I of course hadn’t done anything□unable to.

Impressive.

Then again, I suppose it wasn’t for nothing that Tsukihi served as the brains of the Fire Sisters and had the support of all the area middle schoolers.

“She even told me a secret the other day.”

“A secret? Like what?”

“I can’t tell you, it’s a secret.”

“…”

“Listen, just leave Nadeko to me and go have a lovey-dovey time with Miss Senjogahara! I’ve got an airtight alibi for you!”

“Um, when did I ask for one?”

“Transfer trains multiple times!”

“A timetable-based alibi…”

What kind of a date was that? Maybe if you were a rail fan—not that I knew if Senjogahara was one.

“By the way, what’s Karen doing tomorrow? With, um, what’s-his-name.”

“Mizudori.”

“Right. Is she going on a date with what’s-his-name?”

“You really have no interest at all in learning your sisters’ boyfriends’ names, do you? Mm, no, Karen said she’d be going to her dojo tomorrow. I guess to celebrate her graduation, rather than starting at her new school? Her master had a cool idea, and she’s getting to go through a hundred-man kumite.”

“Why on White Day…”

Romance was a foreign concept to both of my little sisters. They were making it seem like I was the only one floating in air.

Putting Karen aside, I admit it weighed on my conscience a bit that Tsukihi was visiting Sengoku…

“She’s done a hundred-man kumite before,” Tsukihi said, “but Karen wants to win every match this time around. If she does, she’ll be granted a full-contact match with her master.”

“Wow, she’s been living a tale of her own…”

She ought to be the main character instead.

I felt like an improviser, the way I let my situation dictate my actions. Most of my story seemed ad-libbed.

“As the youngest sibling, it makes me proud that you and Karen are moving forward and growing, one step at a time,” Tsukihi then said. “I guess I’m the only one who hasn’t changed.”

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And so, the next day.

March fourteenth.

White Day, or Einstein Day.

The day of my last date as a high schooler.

Allow me to take this opportunity to make a note of something, since there just might be people who don't know this, or have forgotten. I was terribly anxious about Senjogahara's date plan because our first date, also planned by her, back in June, included the shocking element that was Daddy Senjogahara-as-chaperone.

Her excuse, or reason, was that Daddy could drive us promptly to that date's distant location, but I don't think I need to bother describing just how oppressive the enclosed space of an automobile felt as I sat there with my girlfriend and her father, who I was meeting for the first time. The three of us, all alone…

No, not just the three of us. At one point, I was left alone with just Daddy□chills still run down my spine when I think back to that.

Of course, that first date had good moments, and it was a positive memory overall. Still, I can't deny that it traumatized me in some way.

Senjogahara wouldn't recycle that plan, though. Even if she did spring the same surprise on me, I'd already met her father a number of times since then, going so far as to speak to him. I felt confident I'd be able to handle myself better.

Yes. I'd grown.

I hadn't been asleep in bed for the six months I'd been prohibited

from going on dates—even if Daddy were to chaperone us again, even if Grandma and Grandpa came along to make it a family affair, I'd stay cool as a cucumber.

You're no match for me, Hitagi Senjogahara.

With that spirit in my heart, I arrived at the Tamikura Apartments, her residence, at nine in the morning on March fourteenth—I walked there, since both of my bikes had been totaled, and had left with a good bit of time to spare, but being on the lookout for Ononoki tailing me had slowed my journey.

The main event is only starting, so I'm skipping over everything that happened before my departure, but Karen left even earlier to get to her hundred-man kumite, while Tsukihi planned on visiting Sengoku in the afternoon.

The Araragi siblings were keeping busy today—in any case, I arrived at the Tamikura Apartments prepared, which is why I wasn't too shaken to see a car parked outside that I didn't recall seeing before.

Judging by its license plate, it was a rental.

"…"

I wasn't shaken, but it silenced me.

Sheesh, looks like another unusual date in store for me today, I thought as I braced anew. I'd accept it all, show my broadmindedness, and recaptivate my girlfriend after having showed her nothing but my lame side for a while.

Naturally, this was assuming that I'd ever captivated her in the first place, but I was gonna go ahead and make that assumption whatever lay in store for me. That said, I still couldn't begin to fathom why she'd asked for us to start seeing each other that day in that park…

Having passed by the 4WD without paying it any mind, which is to say pretending not to see it, I knocked on the second-floor door to Room 201, where the Senjogaharas lived.

“Welcome to a wonderful day.”

Appearing with a mysterious and pretentious line, Senjogahara looked fairly dressed up□a fully coordinated outfit based around the color white. Though she’d taken the opportunity during summer break to change her hairstyle from long to short, a good amount of time had passed. It was the first time in a while I’d seen her wearing her hair braided.

A French braid, at that.

How fresh!

“I did this with Miss Hanekawa’s old look in mind.”

“Again, the way you express your friendship is a lot to handle…”

“I thought you might appreciate it, too, if I started looking more and more like her.”

“As is your statement just now…”

I didn’t want to think too much about it.

Her view of the world was too involved for me.

“I’d like to cut loose and enjoy today,” she explained. “I want my remarks to create a sense of freedom, of there being no future.”

“I’m fine with freedom, but the no future part? The future is exactly where we’re trying to head next.”

“Only if you’re accepted, right? If not, there’s a chance we’ll be heading into the past.”

“…”

Coming from someone who sailed right into college on a recommendation, her digs had a rich savor.

“What’s the big deal?” she said. “We can only enjoy lighthearted gags about college exams for another few days, until the acceptance

results are out.”

“It’ll be no laughing matter if I really got rejected. Forget about gags, I’d feel like puking.”

“All right, time to go. I need to be back by seven tonight, I can’t keep my dad waiting. We need to wrap this up, every second counts.”

“Um, could you not treat your dinner with your dad as today’s main event? Or you can, but just don’t mention it.”

“Hmph. Then why don’t you shut me up with a kiss?”

“…”

Maybe I did need to shut her up.

Or so I thought, but reading into her words, I found a slight discrepancy with my current take on the situation—she needed to be back? He’d be waiting?

A ride in the car parked in front with Daddy Senjogahara—wasn’t in store for us?

I’d even imagined a worst-case scenario: the three of us would go out during the day, and I’d have to leave on my own once it was time for dinner…but no?

Did the car parked outside have nothing to do with us? Did it belong to someone else living in these apartments? That did seem reasonable—but I was dealing with Hitagi Senjogahara here.

Though reformed, an unpredictable girl.

She shot past my worst-case scenario—coming out of her unit with car keys twirling around her fingertips.

Were we traveling in that 4WD after all? Who was going to sit behind the wheel, with those keys?

“Come on, ride shotgun,” Senjogahara said, getting into the driver’s

seat.

The driver's seat.

Then she buckled up.

Ah, a fine demonstration of a driver respecting traffic rules—and well, since she had the keys, it was only natural for her to get in on the driver's side. No mystery there.

But! Even so!

"What? Whaat? Whaaat?! Hold-on-Gahara, wait wait wait wait. This is just a guess, but could it maybe, possibly, somehow be that you're going to be driving us today?! You'll be behind the wheel?! Hitagi Driver-Gahara?!"

"Yes," she simply nodded.

She clearly had no interest in prolonging this exchange, but I wouldn't have overreacted in the first place if that was enough to make me retreat with an is that so, then please drive safe today.

This was, in a way, more shocking than going to hell.

Her? Driving? I felt more prepared to accept her dad driving us than this!

"Why are you acting so agitated? I'm buckled in as you can see."

"Buckled in or bucking it out?"

I was so shaken that I was talking strange.

I could feel all my mental prep vanishing into thin air—no one else was in the car so we'd be the only ones for the date, but I found myself sincerely wishing that a third party would appear, which is to say a different driver.

"This is buck-crazy, your date plan is going on a drive without a license? You're joking, right? You're only trying to surprise me with this, and we're about to get out of the car, right?! It's just some sort

of show of hospitality, a refreshing drink you've prepared for a guest? We're going to do as proper high school students do and get on the bus, yes?!"

"You know better than anyone how much I hate jokes, Araragi."

Um, no? I knew better than anyone how much she loved jokes—nasty ones in bad taste at that…

"And how very unpleasant of you to assume that I'll be driving without a license."

"What?"

"Ta-daaa."

And with that—she took a card out of her pocket.

Providing her own sound effects.

An object one would call a driver's license.

Hitagi Senjogahara.

Her name printed on it, alongside a photo of her face—and not an automatic transmission-only license, but a full one. A card signifying that its owner may drive on public streets in accordance with Japan's Road Traffic Act.

"Heh, surprised? While you were hard at work studying for your entrance exams, I was hard at work studying for the license test."

"…"

Was I surprised? Yes, yes indeed—it blew away every word I knew and every fact I'd stuffed into my brain over the course of my exam prep.

She'd been going for a driver's license?! And hiding it from me?!

"I passed on my first try," she boasted with a smug smile.

Praise me! Praise me, every inch of her body seemed to say—and as

her boyfriend, I of course wanted to laud my girlfriend's achievements. Nor had I fought my battle against my exams alone. I wanted us to share our trials and tribulations, but unfortunately common sense came first.

Hold on, hold on, hold on! Not having a license was better in that case!

"D-D-Do you even know the school rules?" I asked her.

"Of course I do, I aced the written portion. Traffic is restricted around schools, namely school zones, during the mornings and afternoons."

"I'm not trying to test you on the Road Traffic Act!"

Those were the road rules.

Naoetsu High's school rules—or most prep schools, as far as I knew—strictly prohibited obtaining a driver's license.

As a high school senior born on July seventh, Senjogahara might already be eighteen, old enough to be granted a driver's license, but…that didn't mean she should do something as dangerous and nonsensical as getting one as a student.

Her recommendation-based university acceptance could be rescinded. In fact, an atrocity of this level jeopardized her graduation—I couldn't believe it. People out there really tried that? And one of those people was my girlfriend?

How do I put this? I know I've gone on about how she was reformed—but how do I put this, what can I say? She was a legit delinquent against whom I paled in comparison.

"Wow," I breathed. "You weren't kidding about the no future part… I might end up going to college all by myself now. I've gone all the way around and done a backflip to come to the point where I'm impressed by what you've done, but why would you ever do this?"

"We didn't have to go to school during third term, and I was just so bored that I didn't know what else to do?" replied Senjogahara, her

head tilted.

My girlfriend was living proof that idle hands are the devil's workshop.

"And I thought I'd go ahead and get a license because you wouldn't be able to—though it seems that was an unnecessary concern."

"?"

I didn't quite understand what she was saying. I wouldn't be able to? How rude—I thought, but soon saw her point.

Not showing up in photographs, until just the other day, had been one symptom of my growing vampirism. Thus, I would never be issued a driver's license—and Senjogahara must have fretted over that fact in her own unique way.

In that sense, I couldn't scold her about her antics—wait, no, scratch that.

Emotional reasons didn't cut it.

Even when the emotion was love.

Getting a license as a high school student was still rash…putting a car before her courses, if it kept her from graduating.

"Don't worry," she said, "in that case I'll just break up with you and hang out with Kanbaru."

"Don't talk so casually about breaking up with me. And Kanbaru would be flabbergasted if that happened. You and her in the same year?"

"I think she'd simply be happy," Senjogahara said without a hint of remorse—she just wasn't going to feel any over this matter.

I needed to be the one to back down.

One more day until graduation… I just had to pray that our school didn't find out—and while I wasn't sure if it'd be possible after this

start, I decided to focus on enjoying today.

That's also called not thinking, but there's a lot of thinking in this world that you'd rather not do.

"Don't forget to buckle up after all that talk about the rules, Araragi."

"Yeah, I know… I'm not brave enough to sit in a new driver's car without a seatbelt. I might be known as a raging bull, but even I feel like the China shop owner right now. In fact, I'd sit in a child seat if I could…"

A fresh concern crossed my mind.

"By the way, you're going to tell me where we're going in advance this time, right? It's not that I don't trust you, but if you want us to go somewhere far like that observatory again, I'm doing everything I can to stop you. I'm destroying that steering wheel."

"It'd be a problem if you did, since this is a rental car. Relax, I don't plan on going anywhere that far□and there'd be no point in going to an observatory during the day. Dude, you're dead."

"Excuse me?"

"I said use your head."

"…"

Her sense-of-freedom remarks could be pretty scary… It felt more like reckless abandon.

"So, where are we going? What's our destino?"

"A planetarium," Senjogahara told me flat out, when I thought she'd toy with me□well, I guess she couldn't hide it anymore because she was entering our destination into the car GPS.

"A planetarium?"

"Right. One of the world's many planetaria," she used a plural form

that I never imagined I'd hear as she stepped on the gas.

And with that.

Our terrifying date drive began.

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Though I said terrifying, fortunately Senjogahara was right to be proud of passing on her first try. There were no flaws in her technique—at least from my passenger-seat perspective.

No flaws.

Or maybe flawless—knowing Hanekawa messed up my judgment, not to mention my intense first impression of Senjogahara, but believe it or not, my girlfriend was a bit of a top-spec perfect superhuman herself.

Even the way she changed gears looked stylish.

Renting a car with a manual transmission felt like a sort of statement—and that seemed like the difference here between Hitagi Senjogahara and the humble and modest Hanekawa.

Speaking of skill and tact, I kept talking to her about the topic and learned that despite what she said, she'd at least prepared some countermeasures in case our school discovered her acquisition of a driver's license—in particular, she'd shield herself with a good cause if need be and tell them it was to help her struggling family finances.

Her willingness to use her own complexes to her advantage was, to be honest, something I admired…but what was I doing, being the one recaptivated here?

I didn't want to talk too much while she was driving, so I was quiet in the passenger's seat. Senjogahara, though, seemed to have no difficulty (ever a model student) talking while driving, and in fact she was the one to start speaking to me.

"It helps me relax, so if anything, I'd appreciate it if you talked to me, my dear Watson."

“Your dear Watson… I guess I’m sitting in your passenger seat, but I’d rather not be tasked with putting the tales of your adventures to paper. Nothing about you is Holmesian, anyway.”

“True. Miss Hanekawa is Holmes, not me□by the by, she called me last night.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes. Seems like she’ll be able to make it back by graduation.”

“Huh…”

Tsubasa Hanekawa.

A friend I shared in common with Senjogahara, currently roaming abroad□and though her mind was one of the best in the country, and in fact the world, she’d decided to go on a meandering trip after graduation rather than continue on to college with no set aim or purpose. Hence, she’d spent most of our third term, during which attendance wasn’t mandatory for seniors at our school, diligently hunting down locations for her journey. Actually, she’d been gone from about halfway into second term.

Hunting down locations…

Her shaky plan for the future seemed like something put together by someone too smart for her own good. Perhaps it indicated an even more anarchic streak than Senjogahara’s acquisition of a driver’s license.

How ironic that I, the one supposed to be the biggest anarchist, found myself hewing to the proper path toward higher education.

Not sure who was being ironic there about what.

Hanekawa’s trip was also of course a search for Mèmè Oshino, so in that sense she was traveling for my sake. This meant I, of all people, hadn’t the words to stop her.

Still, Sengoku’s case had somehow reached a solution, and so had my vampirism issue. You could say we didn’t need to look for

Oshino anymore…

Yet according to Tadatsuru.

Oshino would continue to be the key…

“Feels like it’s been a while since I last saw Hanekawa,” I said. “I haven’t contacted her much since she’s overseas and I didn’t want to bother her, but she’s been calling you and not me?”

What a shock. If she was coming back for graduation, she could have told me… I’d more or less assumed she wouldn’t make it.

“You’re right. I wonder why Miss Hanekawa didn’t call you. Who knows, but I did assure her that I’d tell you.”

“What other reason would there be?”

“Maybe I specifically asked her not to call you.”

“You went that far? You were that specific about it? Why would you do that?”

“Don’t worry. I told her that your vampirism’s all better.”

“I’m not worried, but I do feel like lecturing you now… I wanted to be the one to tell her. I’d have thanked her for helping me get through my exams, too.”

“I didn’t go so far as to thank her on your behalf, so let her know when you see her at graduation. Oh, right… She has bestowed upon me a message.”

“Bestowed upon?”

Why so formal? Maybe Ononoki wasn’t the only one who didn’t know how and when to speak respectfully. Then again, you could credit Hanekawa with reforming Senjogahara’s life as well as my own. She deserved so much respect from us, we could never show enough.

In my case, she may have replaced every element of my overall

constitution—a pretty scary woman, in that sense. What kind of adult was she going to become?

“And what’s this message?”

“She said she found Mister Oshino.”

“Oh, huh… What?!”

For a moment there, it went in one ear then out the other.

Fortunately, I wasn’t the one behind the wheel—I’m certain I would’ve caused a traffic accident had it been in my hands. Meanwhile, Senjogahara was nonchalant, still driving with only one hand on the steering—um, why hadn’t she bothered telling me something that important yesterday?

Reporting is all about speed, isn’t it?

“Seriously?” I said.

“Seriously. Well, to be exact, maybe she found the place where he’s hiding out? I don’t remember that well.”

“I’m begging you, please remember. Do everything you can to.”

And hiding out? Why was Senjogahara making him sound like a criminal… But in other words, Hanekawa hadn’t discovered him yet, she’d only found his location—though that was already impressive enough.

“She said it was a tough call whether she could bring him back with her by graduation… There’d be nothing in particular for him to do even if she brought him back now, so she might not force him,” Senjogahara relayed.

I’d yet to explain all of what happened the day before to Senjogahara—about my trip through hell, so maybe that was how she felt.

Perhaps I needed to explain at an early point during our date—though it did make me hesitate. How best to gently tell her

that I was getting dragged into one of Miss Gaen's jobs yet again…

Oshino, of course, would never put it in such a self-victimizing way—I wasn't getting dragged into anything, I was at the center from the start.

But as Ononoki had pointed out, it was hard to tell whether Miss Gaen had planned on enlisting me from the start—and even she couldn't have predicted Hanekawa finding Oshino.

I wouldn't call it conflict, but there seemed to be a bit of tension in the air between Hanekawa and Miss Gaen—could this count as Hanekawa getting back at Miss Gaen?

That said, going by Senjogahara's words, it's not as if she'd seen Oshino—so it was still possible for her to be off the mark.

When I asked about this, Senjogahara answered, "You're right. It's not certain yet—but she said that after much reasoning, she narrowed down his location to two places."

"Two?"

"Yes—I didn't ask for details because I wasn't interested, but I think that's what she said."

"…"

Please, be more interested.

Come to think of it, though, Senjogahara hated personalities like Oshino's—maybe her apathetic stance was only natural, now that she thought he was no longer needed.

Two places… Where and where could they be?

If it was a tough call whether Hanekawa could bring him back by graduation, maybe it was because there were still two possible locations—and of course, both of them might be wrong.

"Much reasoning, huh? Yeah, she really is like some master detective."

Who didn't mind doing the legwork, either—a rarity these days.

"But she didn't say where these two places were?"

"She didn't. But don't get the wrong idea, Araragi. It's not because she was trying to act like some great detective. She tried to tell me like any normal person, but I said I wasn't interested and asked her not to."

"I can't help but wonder how Hanekawa reacted to that."

A master detective's greatest pleasure, thwarted like that. You called the wrong person, Hanekawa.

My reaction would've been superb—or maybe not, I might have acted a lot like Senjogahara thanks to how exhausted I was from the exams (and dealing with Ononoki)…

Being outside of Japan, she couldn't possibly know how they went, and maybe she'd decided not to call me out of consideration after Senjogahara asked her not to—which meant Hanekawa might mistakenly believe that I'd flunked them.

She was always surprisingly quick to jump to conclusions.

"What was it again?" Seeing just how down I was getting, my girlfriend used her notable memory to the fullest to recall Hanekawa's words, though only a small portion. "She said it was the other way around."

"The other way around?"

"Yes, her approach—she does like to leave so much implied and unspoken."

"Are you sure it wasn't because you weren't listening properly? I wonder what she could mean by that…"

Did she mean a situation where the solution was right under her nose the whole time, like in a mystery novel? Had she gone overseas to find Oshino when he was actually still in Japan? And he was near this town or something?

No, I couldn't imagine it being that simple.

I'd be mad if the man we'd searched so much for had been hiding out in our town□but in that case, Hanekawa would just need to come straight back. She wouldn't be in a dilemma where she didn't know if she'd make it in time for graduation.

"Miss Hanekawa also opined that…this was a paid man."

"Opined… And wait, a paid man?"

What did that even mean?

Hmm. I had a lot I needed to think about, I was still concerned, but there didn't seem to be anything I could do□I just had to trust in Hanekawa's self-reliance.

It might be best to keep it a secret from Miss Gaen, though.

Tsubasa Hanekawa, who doesn't know everything.

Izuko Gaen, who knows everything.

I might not know anything, but I at least knew those two. My decision for the time being was to minimize their contact as much as possible.

"As her friend, I guess I should be glad that the searching party didn't get lost too," I said. "I can't imagine that happening to Hanekawa, but you do worry about a girl traveling alone, you know?"

"Yes… By the way, Araragi. Do you know the ironclad rule for when you're a lost child?"

"When you're a lost child? Not for when you're looking for a lost child?" Though that wasn't how I'd describe Oshino and Miss Kagenui.

"Yes. Yet another suggestive remark on Miss Hanekawa's part…"

"You sure you aren't the reason why it sounded suggestive, and not

definitive? Isn't the ironclad rule when you're lost to not move? That's how you keep your problems from cascading."

"Yes. That's what they say□but she mentioned that it's not that simple in real life. That it's actually faster to search for each other when you get split up."

"Really? Seems inefficient to me."

"It'd be horribly inefficient if you both searched at random□in reality, though, people don't meander around. You think about where the other person might be, which is to say you conjecture. In other words, you'll be shrinking the area of your search down to a small area, so it's faster if both of you move□or something like that."

It does assume that your reasoning about the other person's location is on the mark□Senjogahara said.

True. You could even say people get lost because they're incapable of doing just that□so was that what Hanekawa meant by a reverse approach?

Of course, this too was only conjecture.

Someone on my level could never catch up with Hanekawa's thinking no matter how much reasoning I did□so should I sit still and wait for Hanekawa to return by around graduation?

"What else did you two talk about? Did Hanekawa talk about anything other than Oshino?"

"We didn't get into too much detail because of the high phone bill□but I did discuss our date plan. I'll come clean and admit that a planetarium was Miss Hanekawa's idea."

"It was?"

"Yes. My plan was to go visit a volcanic crater."

"…"

It's not that I don't have any interest in volcanic craters, but I was grateful to Hanekawa… What kind of a ridiculous plan had this girl come up with?

"I didn't tell her about me driving because I thought she'd try to stop me."

"I wish you would've asked her about that one…"

"Miss Hanekawa told me about her favorite planetaria, so I chose one from the list. No need to worry, Araragi. Don't look so concerned, there won't be any big surprises waiting for you from here on out. I've been suitably censored by Miss Hanekawa."

Censored…

Not a word you wanted to hear in the context of a date, but knowing that Hanekawa had reviewed the plan brought me some small amount of comfort.

"She got pretty mad at me, and pretty depressed too. The angrier she got, the harder it became for me to tell her about the driver's license."

"I understand how you must have felt, but I feel like being on the receiving end of her anger there would've been the right thing for your own future…"

"I often go to planetaria, of course, so this doesn't feel too much like a special event to me. Still, going with you will be a nice twist."

"Hm… You say that, but isn't this still an uninteresting date for you, in that case?"

Kanbaru had mentioned enjoying planetariums. I wondered if the Valhalla Duo used to go have fun at them together…

"Well, when I go to a planetarium," Senjogahara said, "it tends to be less for fun and more in order to study so I'd like to gaze out into artificial stars without any purpose in mind for a change. I wouldn't say I'm unenthused, so don't worry."

“In order to study? Oh, right. I guess you’d made the rather eccentric choice among students at our school to study planetary science as your science elective…”

I personally didn’t even know what planetary science entailed… But it seemed that Senjoghara, who treasured her childhood memories of visiting observatories as a family, had a special attachment to celestial bodies. It’s not as if I dislike talking about the stars, but I don’t look up into the starry sky with the same kind of devotion as her…

“Yes, which is why my original idea for our date was to visit a volcanic crater. I wanted to observe the outcrops.”

“What kind of an original idea is that? You just wanted to go study? I’d call that fieldwork. What kind of a date were you thinking of inviting me on fresh out of entrance exams?”

“It would be interesting, though. We may be on a proper and healthy date today thanks to Miss Hanekawa, but I can’t deny that my curiosity is going unsatisfied. Considering that you find the greatest gratification in being dragged around and run ragged by me, is today becoming less stimulating for you?”

“Could you at least not say gratification?”

“Vivification?”

“That doesn’t seem right either…”

“Capitulation?”

“You do sometimes make me feel like giving up…”

“But planetaria are often combined with science museums, including the one we’re heading to today. In that sense, we could see it as us going there to study□it might be bad for your heart if we went cold turkey on studying. You might want to gradually cool down by coming into contact with some cutting-edge science at least.”

“I never imagined it’d be bad for your heart to stop studying…”

This made Hanekawa's imprint on our plans for the day clear.

A science museum, a combination of study and play—going to one called into question the very idea of acting like high schoolers, but maybe it was an appropriate choice for people who were bad at having fun like me and Senjogahara.

With Senjogahara's unique twist added on top (driving a car), she didn't need to worry about the day not being stimulating enough. Even if I trusted her driving skills, just being in a new car can make you nervous.

"I don't normally go to science museums, so I'm looking forward to that part," she said. "I wonder what kinds of flying cars they'll have."

"You have high expectations of science museums…" Though flying cars do seem to exist. I continued, "Even if they don't fly, cars these days are pretty amazing. I don't know about this car, but some brake when they sense danger, or have sensors on all sides, or even drive themselves."

"Yes—they're already quite futuristic." Like the Underwater Buggy, she added utterly unnecessarily. The Castle of the Underwater Devil again… "The day might come when you just have to enter your destination into a navigation system for the car to take you there—and you only have to park and get started, just like planes that only require manual takeoff and landing."

"Data skills and parking skills, huh? It'd be nice if I didn't need to get a license. I'd like to step away from testing for a while…"

Not that I saw the law catching up to cars like that anytime soon.

Yes, that feeling of technological advancement surpassing human society.

Just like the way I don't know how to use a smartphone, cars—integrated collections of the latest technology—might become alien to me.

"What are you talking about? I do hope that you get your license

over spring break. Next time around, I'd like you to drive me. After all, you finally show up in pictures."

"You want me to drive you when you can drive on your own, Miss Senjogahara?"

"As a girl, I can't help but dream about riding in my boyfriend's passenger seat," she responded with a somewhat maidenly remark. "I dream about it almost as much as I dream about having a reverse harem."

"That's a very girly dream in its own way, but I'm not sure if you can equate the two…"

"Drive me up to observe some outcroppings by a volcanic crater someday."

She may not have been joking, but at the same time, the way she sought my consent made it hard to reply, Yeah, I'd love to…

"I'm curious, Senjogahara. What do you learn in planetary science, anyway? It's not heavenly bodies all day, right?"

"To be exact, it's an earth science class. I guess you could say it's primarily about Earth as a celestial object though my interest always tends to point toward the universe as a whole. My dream is to draw a complete map of the universe and be known as the second Tadataka Ino. That's what I'll be doing in college."

"Tadataka Ino… The first person to create a modern map of Japan."

"Sadly, they say he created it without knowing much about Hokkaido, but I won't cut any corners. I'll observe outcroppings along every last inch of space and map them."

"Observe outcroppings would be a gross understatement in that case."

Doesn't sound like any Tadataka I-know… Not that I thought Mr. Ino had cut any corners…

Still, I was hearing about this for the first time. My girlfriend

wanted to become an astronaut? Did she mean it? It did sound like a throwaway quip.

“And wait, what is a map of the universe anyway? Do those exist? Are you talking about those diagrams you see of all the planets lined up around the sun?”

“No, those are just illustrations. I’m talking about a map that shows the entire universe… You wouldn’t be too familiar with them unless you took planetary science.”

“Yeah, I’ve never heard of one before.”

“Most of the universe is empty space. Scattered within it are galaxies and gatherings of stars□you might have the vague idea that due to probability, stars are equally spread out through space, but that’s not true. They clump up with one another and exist in unbalanced groupings. That’s what a map of the universe depicts□heh. I wonder if stars prefer company, just like humans do.”

“You can try to make it sound like there’s a moral, but it’s not going to make any sense to me when I haven’t seen these maps.”

“By the way, they aren’t rectangular like world maps or country maps.”

She explained that they’re shaped like Japanese folding fans□which is to say, like ogi.

She said this undramatically.

Ogi.

Nor did I react to□that word.

006

“All right then, hello there, Araragi-senpai. It’s me, Ogi Oshino. So, let’s learn about constellations today,” Ogi said with a smile. She used the laser pointer in her hand to make indications on a sky full of stars projected on a hemispheric dome. Though I found it suspicious that she, a first-year at Naoetsu High, soon to be second-year, would be working at this planetarium as an employee of its science museum, I soon realized I was in a dream.

Senjogahara had pulled off an impressive parallel parking job in the museum’s lot without relying on any advanced automotive features, and we made it to the attached planetarium without incident, but my exhaustion from the previous day must have reared its head—I’d also woken up early. I realize it’s wholly unbecoming for a boy on a date, but I must’ve nodded off in the structure’s pitch darkness.

Since we were in a planetarium, you could say I’d nodded off into space—no, sorry, I continued to be sleepy in my dream and wasn’t coming up with anything clever.

“Please don’t fall asleep, Araragi-senpai. I’ll throw my chalk at you if you do. And since I don’t have any chalk, I’ll throw my laser pointer at you if you do.”

Please don’t. I’d lose consciousness and wake up if she hit me with something like that…

“Ha haa. And then you’d have a thought once you wake up. Is the date you’re on with Miss Senjogahara reality, or were those moments you spent cuddling with me just now the real world? Yes, it’d be what you’d call a butterfly dream, where you can’t tell whether you’re human or insect.”

Even in dreams, Ogi still fired on all cylinders.

“Now then, let us deepen our insights.”

If you asked me if this was dream or reality, it must have still been reality—they must have been discussing something similar in the real- world planetarium.

And because I could hear it in my shallow sleep, it affected my dream—well, in that case, Ogi’s commentary might provide me with enough to at least think of an excuse for Senjogahara once I woke up.

“As you know, there are eighty-eight constellations visible in the sky from Earth—a fact you’re familiar with thanks to Saint Seiya. Can you name them all?”

Come on, don’t be ridiculous. All eighty-eight haven’t even shown up in Saint Seiya yet.

“Indeed. And the southern constellations would be tough for someone living in Japan like yourself—though my rival Miss Hanekawa might just be looking at them from Australia or so right about now,” Ogi said, sounding amused.

Despite her smile, she wasn’t trying to hide anymore that Hanekawa was her rival.

“The constellations in the Southern Hemisphere really are interesting. They have so many you’ve never heard of. Like a chameleon.”

A chameleon? Yeah, pretty amazing…

“As well as Pictor, an easel, and Vela, a ship’s sail.”

Ogi pointed at each constellation with her laser—like a regular navigator. Perhaps these kinds of lectures were always her strong point—perhaps she enjoyed explaining things to people.

But no, if this was a dream, it was just that I unconsciously thought those things about Ogi…

These unusual constellations—well, they would be commonplace in

the Southern Hemisphere, but the names of these groupings of stars I had little to no knowledge of came pouring forth from Ogi's mouth, until□

"Then there's Hydrus, the water snake," she said.

A water snake.

An aquatic□serpent.

"As opposed to Hydra, the sea snake□you do know about Hydra, don't you? It's the largest of all eighty-eight constellations."

The dome's starry sky underwent a total change.

Changing into a sky I'd seen before.

Ogi pointed to Hydra.

"The question of how one measures the size of a constellation is a difficult one, of course. It does start to fall apart once you look at them in three dimensions. Still, the presence of Hydra here does remind one of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, does it not?"

Descriptions of aberrations began mixing into her descriptions of the constellations.

I found it hard to believe this had any link to the real world□a planetarium attached to a science museum wouldn't casually bring up the name of the vampire I knew so well, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded legend who'd returned to her full form the day before.

Was it another unconscious impression of Ogi? That she'd bring it up here? In that sense, you could say my dream's link to reality had only strengthened□

"And while we may call Hydra the sea serpent constellation, its classical name references the mythical beast□do you know about the Hydra? A monster that regenerates again and again, no matter how many times you cut at it. It wouldn't be an overstatement to call it immortal. Similar to the legend of the Yamata no Orochi in

Japan—though it was the famed and heroic Heracles who rid the world of the Hydra, not Susano'o-no-Mikoto."

No matter how many of its heads Heracles cut off, the serpent continued to grow new ones from where they were severed—Ogi said.

Sounding amused.

Miss Kagenui was familiar with how to defeat immortal aberrations, but what exactly did the heroic Heracles do to slay the sea snake—to slay the Hydra? It can't be that the battle ended in vain without him ever defeating it.

"No, it's defeated in a very orthodox way. Though I doubt you could defeat Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade by doing this—he cut off each of the Hydra's nine heads in order, then burned the wounds with fire to block them off and prevent them from growing back. He cut off all of its heads one by one—and thus Heracles defeated the sea serpent."

An orthodox method indeed.

Burn the wounds with flame.

Ogi said it wouldn't work on Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—and maybe it wouldn't, but using fire to burn a vampire did seem like a sound approach.

Immortal monsters.

Need to be fought with fire.

Just as I was sent to Avīci, the hell where nothing but flames surround you on every side…

"Perhaps only a legendary hero can defeat a legendary vampire—but I digress," Ogi continued. "When Heracles fought this sea snake, Cancer the crab attacked him as well, fighting on the side of the serpent and snipping at Heracles with its big claws."

Cancer—the crab?

“But the giant crab might as well have been a louse, not so much as tickling Heracles before being defeated in return. Crushed underfoot—and they say the impact turned the crab flat or something. Of course, the crab was praised for its heroism for facing Heracles, and a goddess placed it in the sky as a constellation, so that its name would be remembered.”

Ogi pointed all around Cancer as she spoke.

One of the great things about planetariums must be their flexibility in situations like these—you can only see so many constellations in an actual starry sky, or over the course of a season, but the flip of a switch can show you anything you want, whether the south or north sky, summer or winter constellations, or the stars at dusk or dawn.

“Its attitude of taking on a frightful enemy with modest weapons is like Miss Senjogahara encapsulated—you ought to tell this story to her once you wake up and show her just how great of a boyfriend you are.”

I didn’t know about that last part…

The story was an interesting one, but Senjogahara wouldn’t be happy to hear about a crab getting crushed underfoot…

I didn’t know to what extent my dream and the real-life planetarium were connected, but if she was hearing this commentary on Cancer in the waking world, how did she feel? Not that she liked crabs or had any strong emotional attachment to them just because she’d been in the grips of a crab aberration.

But as someone born on July seventh.

Senjogahara—was a Cancer.

I would of course call it a stretch to read any sort of meaning into that—as far as I could recall, she’d never once allied herself with Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade…which is to say Shinobu Oshino.

In fact, Senjogahara had been the only one who didn’t want to go

looking for Shinobu when she went missing—her stance of disliking children remained the same, whether reformed or not.

Even if she were to come across Shinobu fighting for her life, I couldn't imagine Senjogahara risking a trampling just to lend her support…

"You're right—I'm not too familiar with the situation, but when Miss Senjogahara put herself on the line to protect you from Sengoku, she did so because it was you. The former Heartunderblade was just a bonus," Ogi nodded. "It is interesting to consider—who would win if the then-snake god, Nadeko Sengoku when she reigned over Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, faced off against the fully restored Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade. The odds are in favor of the Aberration Slayer, who has the power to end the entire world, but a snake god would be every bit as immortal—though this was a land and not sea serpent."

Snake vs. sea serpent.

A deeply poisonous scenario if they both possessed venom… While Ogi spoke of it like a dream matchup, I could only see it turning into a fruitless mudslinging match between immortals.

An eternal, snake-eat-snake competition.

"Indeed. And while it's not Hydra, Serpens is another constellation that symbolizes immortality—" Ogi said as the dome's night sky shifted again.

Her laser pointer indicated the constellation of Serpens.

"After all, it can be said to have a certain peculiarity that is unique among the eighty-eight. Do you know what it might be?"

I don't—

I replied.

Come to think of it, if this was a dream, it was odd for Ogi to be expounding facts that I didn't know—and the discussion seemed to be a little too much about aberrations to be something I was getting

from the real-life planetarium by way of sleep learning.

Was that the talk we'd attended?

Serpens' characteristics—I couldn't see Ogi choosing planetary science as an elective, but did she still know the answer?

"I don't know anything," she said with a dark smile. "You're the one who knows. Really, you should be aware of it. See, just like this."

With that, the light from Ogi's laser pointer swung to both sides—from east to west, to use cardinal directions.

"Serpens exists while being divided into east and west, yet it's a single constellation. As a serpent—it's been chopped in two," she said. "It exists in separate parts, its upper half to the west, and its lower half to the east—which is to say that just by looking at it, you can tell it's immortal. Just think, it lives despite its body being split in two… Then again, it seems you often find your own body split in two."

Forget split in two, I was chopped to pieces just yesterday—but putting that aside, not only was this my first time hearing that Serpens existed in the sky as two disconnected pieces, the fact shocked me.

Why had it been placed there in the sky in that shape? Could there be another story behind it, just as for Cancer? Something like a legend of a snake being chopped in two, like the flattened crab—

"Yes," said Ogi, as if in reply. "In fact, another constellation exists in the sky between those two separated parts—and I'm certain you're familiar with this one. Ophiuchus."

The serpent-bearer.

Right, one of the thirteen constellations.

I vividly remembered the time when I discussed it with Kanbaru and she burst out laughing—in fact, the memory was still fresh. Kanbaru still brought it up as a way to annoy me.

“As a whole, the serpent-bearer is shown to hold the upper and lower parts of the snake in his left and right arms—to explain the detailed backstory in a mythical kind of way, it seems that the constellation of the serpent-bearer cut into Serpens’ original location. Something I’m sure the serpent found quite annoying.”

True, it made him seem more like someone who’d painted over and killed a serpent than someone bearing one.

But no, the serpent was immortal because that wasn’t enough to kill it—a creature so mystical that it would be worshiped as a god.

A creature and a creeper.

In that sense, while I may have been in the dark about what made Serpens special, which is to say its division into east and west, I did know a little about the serpent-bearer—right, wasn’t it supposed to be Asclepius, the great and famed doctor?

“That’s right. I’d expect no less out of someone as learned as you,” Ogi said with a tinge of sarcasm, but it seemed I wasn’t mistaken. “While he may be called the serpent-bearer, if anything, you could say that Asclepius learned from the serpent—as he began down the path of medicine after witnessing the drama of a dying snake coming back to life.”

Huh. I didn’t know that part.

“But—this would come to haunt him as well. In a stroke of bad luck, you might say—or maybe he was crushed to death by his own talents. Asclepius’ medical abilities grew and grew to the point where he could even bring the dead back to life. Reviving the dead is the ultimate form of regenerative medicine—but it was a step too far.”

He went too far, Ogi repeated the essential point.

“He broke the rules. I guess you could say he violated a universal law… It earned him the anger of Hades, king of the underworld, who struck Asclepius with lightning and quite literally sent him into the heavens. Perhaps you could say that seeing an immortal snake

is what caused him to lose his own life. It almost sounds like the fruit of knowledge…”

The fruit of knowledge.

Neither was exactly a happy outcome: being expelled from paradise, getting turned into a constellation…

In terms of what a doctor was for, however, I didn’t see regenerative medicine as any kind of violation of a universal law—what could have made Hades, king of the underworld, so mad?

Then again, as someone who’d just managed to come back from hell, I did see aberrational and medical immortality as separate…

“Well, the underworld would empty out if every dead person came back to life—there wasn’t anyone in your hell either, was there? But I wouldn’t call it hell if it’s abandoned, I’d call it a ghost town.”

Sure, Asclepius, victim of that lightning bolt, might not have been immortal himself, but the act of bringing a human back to life—the act of mass-producing immortality is quite the sin.

Ogi then made another comment, as if it had just come to mind.

“Yotsugi Ononoki, too. She’s someone who came back to life after death—but in retaliation, everyone involved in bringing her back was struck by a curse.”

Huh? What was she talking about?

A curse?

I felt like Tadatsuru had mentioned Miss Kagenui not walking on the ground as being a kind of curse…

“You could of course debate which is worse, a lightning bolt or a curse—but it does make me wonder. What kind of punishment is going to come to Miss Gaen for bringing you back from hell? You may not be happy with the way things now stand, with you acting just as she wants, but keep in mind that it’s not as if she’s avoiding all risk herself.”

Why would Ogi say that? Why was she defending Miss Gaen?

Asking that, of course, also forced me to wonder why Ogi knew about me going to hell and Miss Gaen bringing me back from it, but

“Ha haa,” Ogi laughed, putting the laser pointer back in her pocket and ambling over to my seat.

She then tried to sit next to me.

In reality, the planetarium was a close to sold-out affair for the morning session, but I was its only visitor in this dream yet despite it being empty, Ogi was trying to sit right next to me.

“Ogi. If you’re going to sit, sit to my left.”

“Why?”

“That’s Senjogahara’s seat.”

“Oh? How romantic. No need to worry. I have no intention whatsoever of threatening the throne of the female lead. I think I could at least aim to become a little-sister character but while Karen is one thing, I wouldn’t want to have to compete against Tsukihi,” Ogi said, sitting to my left as requested.

It seemed she was done with her time acting as a planetarium employee.

“By the way, what’s your sign?”

Perhaps that’s why she now came at me with what seemed more like plain small talk than any kind of celestial episode and I admit, I have an easier time with more laidback topics.

“Hm… Um, I think it was either Taurus or Aries.”

“How vague.”

“That’s how it is if you’re not interested in horoscopes I’m sure a surprising number of people out there don’t know their blood type,

either.”

“Perhaps—do you not believe in fortune-telling much?”

“I don’t know… I used to always be negative about it, but accepting the existence of aberrations and hell, while denying the existence of fortunes, seems inconsistent…”

“Ha haa. To compare your situation to a mystery novel, it’d be like a book that’s okay with detectives who have superpowers but paradoxically refuses any supernatural phenomena.”

Ogi and her mystery analogies—but maybe her example was the easiest to understand.

“Knowing you, I bet when you were sent to hell you started thinking about the meaning of life being lessened by the existence of a world after death. Am I right?”

“I didn’t go that far, but…yes, I did think something similar. Still…”

“Yes, you were able to come back to life precisely because you didn’t think that, no? Well, fools do tend to cling on to life. To me, it just looks like you glossing over one mistake with an even bigger mistake,” Ogi said to my left as she looked up at the dome’s projected sky. “Not a covering up of shame, but a covering up of your mistakes.”

“…”

“Of course, it’s this cover-up that must have led Miss Gaen to send me an invitation—an obvious trap, but one I can’t help but react to. It’s as if she’s calling out to my very instincts. You can tell she’s an expert by the way she’s thought of so many things.”

Ogi giggled.

In the most high-school girlish way.

But she—her true identity.

Was as Tadatsuru Teori said.

As he taught me in the depths of hell.

The client who had asked him to slay me and Shinobu□

“Araragi-senpai. What do you think being right means?”

Now the topic strayed entirely from the starry sky□

As Ogi asked me the question.

No, this was of course nothing more than a conversation in a dream. It wasn’t as if I was really speaking with her□but what about the real her?

What did I know about Ogi Oshino?

Mèmè Oshino’s niece.

A lineage of experts.

A transfer student introduced to me by Suruga Kanbaru□

“No need to give it too much serious thought. The meaning of being right changes all the time, after all. You can claim that justice always prevails all you want, but in truth, it does lose a lot of the time. That said, the idea that might makes right is shallower than you’d expect. It all gets tricky because we use grand words like justice□we might be better off with something like justiness instead.”

I still didn’t get what she was saying.

I don’t normally live my life thinking about what’s just or justy, what’s wrong or mistaken□but I guess that’s exactly why I was in my current predicament.

Had I never failed to focus on deciding what is right, or what is wise, or what is beautiful or cool this whole time, the situation wouldn’t have gotten so complicated.

I didn’t think of it as a better outcome.

But I also thought—what if it had been?

“It’s hard to do the right thing,” Ogi said. “In particular, it’s very hard to only do the right thing—because doing the right thing means having to do things that are wrong, or not right, at the same time. Just flip through a newspaper and you’ll see all the examples you want of people resorting to injustice in the pursuit of justice—to play off the idea that justice always wins out in the end, I guess I’m saying that in order to win, you also have to lose at some point. There’s no such thing as a perfect record—”

Miss Gaen had said the same thing.

She’d compared it to the game of shogi—something about how even the greatest player can’t win a match against the most rank beginner without losing at least one piece.

Of course, she cut me into pieces immediately after, so it made me think that I myself was the loss in her eyes…

“Which is why, in order to be just, you must avoid doing what is just. If doing the right thing means making mistakes, you can only end up even.”

In that case, what were you supposed to do?

I certainly hadn’t done everything right—but I was strongly attracted to what’s right because of that.

Like Miss Kagenui, for example.

Or like the Fire Sisters.

I would be lying if I said I had no admiration whatsoever for people who believed in their own rightness and lived accordingly.

“Sure—but it’s not as if Miss Kagenui and the Fire Sisters are doing the right thing when they put that way of life into practice, even if they call it justice. Instead of doing the right thing in order to be right—”

They right wrongs.

Adjust the unjust.

That's how they choose to live their lives.

What Ogi said was an extension of the conversation I had in hell with Hachikuji.

An extension, and a case of extra innings.

"Or you could say that what they do is smite, maybe upbraid. In other words, while the enemy of an enemy may not be an ally, becoming the enemy of evil does make you its antonym, appointing yourself as just. Though it does put you one wrong step away from a situation where you're simply complaining about what you find distasteful it does allow you to get drunk off a sense of justice."

Drunk off a sense of justice, huh?

That if anything was the kind of thing I often said to the Fire Sisters…but it was true. Their acts of justice were often nothing more than eliminating "bad" guys, as best represented by that conman, or taking care of the aftermath of "bad" stuff.

Whether it was Karen or Tsukihi or Miss Kagenui, it would never cross my mind to describe their personalities as just or right.

If anyone existed who was "right" in that sense, it was Tsubasa Hanekawa in her former days which meant that Ogi was correct. Hanekawa had no choice but to create the aberration known as Black Hanekawa in order to maintain that sense of rightness.

In order to be right.

She had no choice but to make a mistake.

I may not have been able to right that wrong in fact, I allowed Hanekawa's mistake to persist, which meant that after all, I wasn't in the right back then.

As Ogi said.

"And I too seek the kind of rightness that comes from righting

wrongs—my role is to eject those who break the rules.”

Break the rules. Eject.

The words began to remind me of something—but I couldn’t gather my thoughts, there in my dream.

They scattered—dispersed.

“Of course, I’m not a demon—neither a vampire nor one of hell’s devils. I wouldn’t eject someone over an illegal act, or two, and am prepared to hand out suspended sentences… The show’s almost over. I think you ought to wake up.”

Hearing this, I reflexively checked my watch.

I didn’t know how reliable a wristwatch was in a dream, but indeed, nearly thirty minutes had passed since the beginning of the show.

“Miss Senjogahara will be disappointed in you if you’re still dozing as the lights go up. She went to the trouble of putting this date together, so I wouldn’t blame her if she dumped you for sleeping during it. So come on, now, let’s wake up.”

Ogi reached out to me and gave my body a gentle shake—she was pretty quick to make physical contact with me for a girl, but it was out of consideration. She only wanted to wake me up, so I wasn’t going to lecture her.

“Enjoy the rest of your date with your lover—but, Araragi-senpai. Whenever you find yourself with time to kill, think about what being right means—and let’s talk about it when we meet in the real world.”

Okay, got it. If I remember after I wake up, of course—I answered her in my mind.

Then, as if to follow up—and while I expected no answer at all—I asked Ogi.

Still, what exactly are you, anyway?

“We’ll discuss that too when we meet again. I had a lot of fun playing around with you for the past few months, but I’m sad to say that I don’t exist in order to have fun. But if I were to say what I can here…”

I’m the cosmic rule.

Though Ogi’s answer was calm and casual, it was also immense.

A map of the universe.

The shape of an ogi, a folding fan.

A pitch-dark void□an uneven galaxy.

“Don’t think too much about that either. Now that you’ve been brought back from hell and are a full human being again, I may not have to involve myself with you too much□if everything goes well.”

So please, don’t fall for Miss Gaen’s sweet talk, warned Ogi.

“I’m sincerely hoping that you’ll make the right decision this time around when it comes to the now-whole Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade as well as Mayoi Hachikuji, who’s made her way back to this world despite having passed on to the next one□who has strayed once more□and choose to abandon them.”

007

I woke up.

I woke up?

Oh no, I'd dozed off—even if I was tired, and even if I was in an environment as cozy as a planetarium, who falls asleep during a date?

Me, of all people? Or rather—even by my standards, really?

I'd somehow managed to wake up right as the show came to an end, but I remembered nothing about any projections or starry skies displayed on the dome.

I'd fallen asleep and hadn't even dreamed.

How embarrassing.

What kind of approach did I need to take with Senjogahara, sitting to my right? Should I talk to her pretending I'd been awake the whole time, or should I be honest and tell her I'd nodded off, then apologize for ruining our first date in forever?

I turned to face her, still unable to make a decision—

"…"

Senjogahara was also sleeping.

She slept there in total silence.

The way she slept involved such a lack of vital reactions that I wondered for a moment if she might be dead… I guess I'd never seen her fully asleep—this was how she slept?

To be honest, it scared me.

Though nothing about her seemed like Sleeping Beauty or Snow White, a comparison with them could be drawn given how borderline comatose she appeared.

Wait, don't tell me she really was dead…

"Senjogahara?"

"I'm not sleeping."

Blink.

Both of her eyelids opened simultaneously without having betrayed the slightest sign of doing so.

It was more like an awakening than waking up.

Like a computer that boots in one second.

"I wasn't sleeping at all. I wasn't sleeping at all. I was just thinking with my eyes shut."

"…"

An artless excuse, but one that I started to believe when she said it with such a straight face.

Still, how shallow of a sleeper was she if whispering her name could wake her up?

Then again, considering her past experiences and considering just how long she had to live with a constant threat looming over her, I could understand why she might have trouble kicking a habit of sleeping like some kind of wild animal.

"I'm sorry. To tell you the truth, I was asleep," Senjogahara now gave me an honest apology.

Perhaps she realized she wouldn't be able to make her excuse work but apologizing at all showed how much more of an honest

person she'd become.

She used to be the type to say she'd rather die than apologize.

No one needs a personality that strong.

I still can't believe that I agreed to start going out with her back in those days…

Anyway, it felt like my nap had been canceled out thanks to Senjogahara being asleep. I felt like thanking her, if anything…but it didn't feel right to let her be the only one afflicted with guilt, and to keep all my relief to myself.

"It's okay. I was sleeping a little too," I confessed. In fact I'd been sound asleep, but allow me that small flourish.

"Oh. I suppose we were both tired□going on a date the day after your exams was too much of a rush job, I guess," Senjogahara said as she stretched. Our seats hadn't been too comfortable or anything, and I did the same. "It's also because we're able to relax. Two of your problems were settled on the same day, your entrance exams and your vampiric body."

"Yeah, you're right."

My issues might have bothered her even more than they bothered me□now that I thought about it, I'd done nothing but worry her for the past six months.

What an awful boyfriend.

True, I caught Senjogahara when she slipped and fell from the stairs in May, and I played a role in resolving something that had plagued her for some time□and true, she must have felt grateful, but on the balance, I was the greater beneficiary by far.

I was the one who'd been repaid threefold.

Was there a couple any more poorly matched than us? I couldn't even start to pay her back with something like marshmallows.

“What should we do, Araragi? It’ll ruin our plans, but do you want to give this another run if we were both asleep for it?”

“No…” I shook my head. “We’ll have plenty more opportunities in the future, so some other time. Let’s stick to your plan for today’s date.”

I tried to stress in the future—and while I don’t know if this came across, Senjogahara said, “Right, it’s not as if we’re guaranteed to get tickets for the next show at this point,” and stood right up. Briskly, like she hadn’t been asleep until just now—I followed her lead, as if to learn from her example.

“So, what are the plans from here?”

“As I said in the car, we’re going to learn about contemporary, cutting-edge science in the attached museum. While I don’t know about flying cars, they do seem to have lots of different hands-on exhibits.”

“Hm. Well, I guess I shouldn’t lose interest in studying… It’s something we’ll have to keep on doing once we’re in college.”

“Yes. To become an astronaut,” Senjogahara said with a smile.

Her smile was difficult to read. Still, even though I didn’t know if I’d be accepted, I needed to start thinking about that kind of thing too once I finally became a college student.

That future thing.

College would be four years of trying to find out, because I’d enter not knowing what I wanted to do—but I knew I’d be able to describe the four years as something out of a dream, after spending a year nearly losing that future again and again.

“Do you have dreams for your future?” Senjogahara asked me as we left the planetarium, as if she’d read my mind—dreams for the future.

What an uncomfortable phrase.

“No, not really…”

“Like a job you’re aspiring to.”

“Can’t say I do. I’ve never even wanted to become a baseball player growing up… I wasn’t raised in an environment that made me aspire to work in any kind of profession.”

“Well, your parents are in a pretty unique line of work—not that I’m one to talk… I would personally like it if you didn’t take after Miss Hanekawa and try to become an expert in yokai extermination out of an admiration for Mister Oshino,” Senjogahara stated, though in a reserved way.

I couldn’t blame her.

She’d had five terrible experiences with so-called experts in the occult. Nothing could keep her from distrusting that whole endeavor.

Though her return to society was made possible in part by Oshino, that fact and her personal feelings must be two separate things.

“Sure, that’s part of it, but I also find it hard to forgive Mister Oshino for being such a bad influence on my angel, Miss Hanekawa. I barely got to cuddle with her during the second half of this school year thanks to that location hunt or whatever she’s on.”

“…”

That hardly seemed fair.

And my angel?

Sure, Hanekawa’s future plans did involve roaming the planet after graduation, but Oshino wasn’t to blame for her going on a location hunt while still a student.

That was on someone else with the same surname: Ogi Oshino.

Everything that was happening—while not only Mèmè Oshino was away, but just as Tsubasa Hanekawa was as well.

That was now clear.

“Even if it’s too late for Miss Hanekawa, I’d at least like to keep you from living that way.”

“Well, I don’t think I could.”

My somewhat vague answer had to do with my suspicion that steering clear of aberrations for the rest of my life would be very difficult, or rather, absolutely impossible.

Given Shinobu Oshino.

I’d never cut ties with aberrations when I considered my relationship with her—even if it meant going to hell.

“I’d be fine with you not working at all, as long as you don’t follow in his footsteps. I’ll care for you for the rest of my life.”

“Aren’t people like that called spongers?”

“And I’ll be known as a magnanimous woman.”

“No, I’m pretty sure people wouldn’t be so positive. They’ll say I’m a no-good man and you’re a no-good woman.”

“Bring it on. A sponger and his sucked-dry woman. Seems like a perfect couple to me.”

“Perfect in a very sad way…”

Made for each other, we’d deserve each other as well.

Hm.

Having (provisionally) completed my goal of making it through my entrance exams, there were many issues I needed to consider—it made me realize anew that life has lots of checkpoints but no finish line.

Which is exactly why it’s so hard to always win in life. You have no choice but to lose at some point—hm? Where did that come from?

Was it something Miss Gaen said?

No, elsewhere. Like a dream I just had—but what kind of dream? Hadn't I not dreamed?

"We'll do a lap of the science museum, and then we'll have lunch. And while we won't be getting fast food, please think of it as just a light snack. A big lunch will interfere with my evening meal, you see," Senjogahara went back to explaining her plan for our date.

It was her father, let us note, that she'd be dining with… She was making lunch with her boyfriend a modest meal to better accommodate an event with Daddy, let us note.

Not that I could do anything to change her mind.

In fact, I needed to cheer her on.

During our first date in June, their relationship was still a rocky one. I wanted to be happy for her if it had improved so much, even if it meant putting up with a little bit of neglect.

Like Tsukihi had said the day before, I'd repaired my relationship with my little sisters, which hadn't been too great in the past, to the point where we could even go out on the town together. I saw this as a positive, and so I understood—just how valuable it is to have a family that gets along.

I wanted the same for Senjogahara.

She needed to value her ties to her father in particular since her mother was out of the picture—that said, I still found it a bit regrettable.

I can't be that understanding of a person.

I hoped our afternoon plans would be enough to make up for our perfunctory lunch—I felt ready to cause a ruckus and a scene if she said they were going to be just as light so she wouldn't be tired out by dinner.

Her professed desire to experience a high school-ish date while still

a high schooler was no lie, though.

“Our morning plans were academic in focus, and now our afternoon plans, revolving around fun, await us,” she explained. “We’ll drive a bit over to town for some bowling and tea during the first half, then karaoke for the second.”

“Whoa…” I was moved. Bowling was one thing, but karaoke felt so unlike her that she left me staggered.

“Yes. Well, I came up with the bowling, but I included karaoke on Miss Hanekawa’s advice.”

“Her advice.”

“It seems that according to her, the two of you go to karaoke quite often? How should I describe it as your girlfriend, I feel like I don’t want to lose to Miss Hanekawa, even if it is her.”

“…”

Not quite what you called taking someone’s advice… How was I going to enjoy our karaoke session when that was her reason?

But I did want to hear Senjogahara sing. I’d allow it.

“And what’s with the bowling? Are you…the bowling type?”

“I haven’t been since I started high school, but I bowled a lot during middle school, with Kanbaru or celebrating with the track team. I used to carve out some artistic scores, so I felt like revisiting my roots for the first time in a while. What about you, Araragi?”

“Hm?”

“Bowling. What’s your high score?”

“Oh, I’m a beginner when it comes to bowling. I don’t think I’ve ever played before, in fact… I’d appreciate your instruction.”

“Understood. So we agree? Loser gets punished?”

“You decided that after you found out I’m a beginner.”

“Loser shows absolute submission to the winner’s commands.”

“That’s way too harsh!”

To recap.

Her plan for our date seemed to be “Drive → Planetarium → Science Museum → Lunch (light meal) → Drive → Bowling → Move → Tea Time → Move → Karaoke → Disperse.” A grueling schedule liable to fill you up, even if that meal was light.

“There were a lot of other places I wanted to go and things I wanted to do… Oh well. Love may be infinite, but time is finite,” Senjogahara muttered, sounding dissatisfied with the tough schedule she’d put together herself, including dinner with her father after it all. “I guess it’s fine… This may be our last date as high school students, but we can go on all the dates we want after this one. All the dates we want, every morning and every evening, from dawn to dusk. Isn’t that right?”

“…”

When she worded it that way, there was only one possible answer.

“Yeah, that’s right. Of course.”

But I wasn’t feeling as confident as I sounded□considering what came next.

When I considered Ogi Oshino.

Nothing was certain.

008

Despite the unbecoming blunder of sleeping in the planetarium, I made no major mistakes after that, and so we—or at least I was able to have a good time.

As far as the science museum goes, I honestly found it more interesting than I expected. It helped that my expected entertainment value was close to zero. The purpose of these facilities demanded that they feature more content for elementary and middle school students (or for families) than for high school students, which had made me nervous. Eighteen year olds like Senjogahara and me were at the most awkward age possible to enjoy it. However, and perhaps I ought to give credit to Hanekawa's advice contributing to our date schedule, the museum was pretty satisfying.

This made my nap in the planetarium all the more frustrating—but as far as that goes, it did allow me to see the rare and valuable sight that is Senjogahara's sleeping face. I decided to tell myself I'd seen a sight greater than any starry sky.

I wasn't off having a great time all on my own, of course. Senjogahara frolicked about as well—okay, maybe you can say she conducted herself just like the science nerd she was, but given how she never used to be open about herself, given how she'd never frolic in the presence of others or in public (or even with her boyfriend), the mere sight of her acting that way provided me with great joy.

"How about one more lap," she suggested quite seriously, her attitude nothing like it was in the planetarium, but I had to tell her no. Not treating her own date plan with due respect seemed like the inevitable drawback or natural flip side of a girl whose calling card was lightning-quick assessments and decisions.

Having fun in the moment and going with the flow was all well and good, but healthy young high schoolers spending the entire day in a science museum until it closed was just too wholesome for me, and I somehow managed to convince her out of that one.

She backed down when I used the day's now oft-repeated, or rather, all-powerful line: We'll be able to do this as many more times as we want.

Then, lunch.

She'd called it a light snack, so I kept the hurdles of my expectations low. That must have been her plan all along, though, as she took me to a place with a pretty nice atmosphere.

She said we wouldn't be getting fast food, and the only thing I could point out and jokingly complain about was that it was more of a cafe for women (their customers aside from me being all young ladies). The food tasted good, and it was even very reasonably priced.

If you're curious about any payments that took place during the date, we split them all right down the middle—and while part of me wondered if I should be paying for everything as a man, not just that day but in general (especially when I took her domestic situation into account), Senjogahara was the type of person with a strong aversion to receiving charity, no matter who it came from.

My guess is that this personality trait of hers had to do with a certain conman—perhaps she'd been influenced more deeply by that (mockery of an) expert than Hanekawa was by Oshino.

Though it'd have to be a case of learning from a good example of what not to do.

In any case, we split the payments, if not down to the last yen—well, she might have spent more in the end considering the costs for the rental car and gasoline.

The thought of this being an omen of sponging off of her someday does make me realize that I need to resolve to stay on my toes.

Nothing about Senjogahara seemed sucked dry yet, of course—in any case, while she seemed not to care about cafes and such, she was very much a connoisseur.

Then afternoon came.

The part revolving around fun.

The first half, bowling time—while I'd been terrified to learn that a bet was in place, to cut to the chase, I ended up winning.

"Damn you, Araragi… I can't believe you'd lie to me… You're no beginner at all," Senjogahara hurled complaints my way.

Even the resentment in her eyes was a heartwarming reminder, in its own way, of how rich her facial expressions had become (I was also reminded of Ononoki's remark that nothing excited her more than seeing someone mad), but for the most part it just brought back scary memories.

It's not like I lied, though. I was a beginner—me being a bowling amateur was the honest truth, I just happened to win anyway. I mean, I'd have preferred to lose if she was going to glare at me like that.

I didn't need something like the right to boss her around.

In fact, Senjogahara only had herself to blame for the loss—it seems her memories had grown rose-tinted.

Artistic scores?

To put it in a somewhat harsher way, she'd only remembered the good parts.

Well, she did show some impressive skills from the first frame to the fifth. Pitching so perfect, I found it surprising that she hadn't brought her own ball.

I don't know exactly what the terms are, something about strikes or turkeys, but in any case, she kept on knocking down all ten pins at once, again and again, until about halfway through the game.

Wow, you're actually serious about this, I joked—and felt indulgent, ready to listen to an order or two in return for getting to see her beautiful form. As for me, I stayed in her shadow racking up a score neither good nor bad, neither impressive nor amusing, just a very average score.

Yet once the sixth frame started, something changed about the way she played—everything changed.

To put it simply, Hitagi Senjogahara's score from the sixth frame onward consisted of nothing but gutter balls.

Her throws were so tired that by the end I wondered if they'd make it to the end of the lane—yes.

In short, Senjogahara got tired.

Apparently her arm went numb.

A lack of endurance and stamina because of her background as a sprinter—must have been part of it, but the real problem must have been a lack of muscle.

Though she tried to put a clever spin on the situation by bowling with her left arm partway through, it wasn't a spin that helped the balls find their target.

And so, as the match progressed, my slowly but steadily growing score caught up, then ultimately overtook hers.

I guess you could say that I made a miracle happen.

Or that baseball doesn't have an exclusive patent on unscripted drama.

"Fine. I'll admit I lost."

Though Senjogahara displayed an unyielding competitiveness that made it clear she was once Kanbaru's direct senior, as a soon-to-be university student (so long as our school didn't find out about her license), she accepted defeat in the end.

“Give me whatever order you want. Come on, what kind of erotic demand are you going to make? My anticipation only grows.”

She was being ridiculous. Out of curiosity, I asked her what kind of demand she had planned on making.

“Some kind of erotic demand, what else?!” she barked, seeming upset for whatever reason.

I had to point out that she was expecting the same outcome whoever won—and vaguely recalling that I’d been in a similar situation before, I decided my play would be to say we should walk to tea with our arms intertwined.

Ever after leaving the science museum, the word of the day seemed to be wholesome.

Tea time.

Or as they might say in Britain, afternoon tea.

I hate to describe it by price before anything, but it cost more than our lunch—maybe that’s just how it goes, and that fact is why Senjogahara seemed to see it as the true main event.

As we elegantly sipped our tea and enjoyed fancy sweets, I took the opportunity to go over the previous day’s events. I confessed to Senjogahara why my progressing vampiric transformation had come to a halt, why what should have been an irreversible forward march had become reversible.

There were of course parts I couldn’t tell her, so I didn’t disclose everything. Still, I shared with her whatever I could.

“Huh…I don’t know whether to say it’s surprising or typical Araragi behavior that you embarked on an adventure like that on the very morning of your exam…or maybe I should just ask what the hell you’re doing.”

As I feared, I’d mildly angered her.

Of course, no home tutor would be pleased to hear that her pupil

had walked into a college exam with that carefree an attitude, but perhaps she had second thoughts about saying anything too harsh to someone who'd been sent to hell of all places just the day before.

"I'm sure that was very difficult for you," she said, keeping herself at that.

Not that I knew how to react to sympathy, either.

Also, I needed to tell her that it was too early to be using the past tense. It wasn't like everything had come to an end—while I didn't know the details of Miss Gaen's plan, I knew I'd have to play some sort of role.

"Yes, given your blond Lolita-slave and Hachikuji, that's probably true. Hachikuji in particular, since it sounds like she's Miss Gaen's de facto hostage."

I wasn't sure hostage was fair (not to mention blond Lolita-slave), but she was absolutely right.

It made total sense.

"And Araragi, if you looked at the situation as a balance sheet, you'd find yourself in the red. I suppose you do have to repay your debts… Just as I paid Mister Oshino his fee, however much I hated doing so."

Just how much did she hate him?

That had to be too much hate.

In fact, she seemed to hate him more than ever—had Hanekawa going on her location hunt left Senjogahara that lonely?

In which case, she formed a duo with Hanekawa at this point, not Kanbaru—what would you call that combination?

"But putting aside the issue of what you owe…there are some things I don't understand. What does this Miss Gaen want to do, anyway? What's the goal of her actions—is she doing this as part of a job?"

Pondering those questions left me at a loss for answers—it's not that I didn't have any, of course. I'd heard time and time again from both Miss Gaen and her associates about her goals, or rather, her sense of purpose.

It's just that it was so lofty.

Too lofty for people at my level to understand—to simplify, she must have plotted to subdue this aberration-filled town, but that almost made her sound like some champion of justice.

Justice.

Rightness.

And then you had what came from that rightness—mistakes.

Sacrifices.

Why did it seem like I'd talked about this recently? Super recently, at that…

"To speak from my experience of approaching every day from a risk-management perspective…there's nothing scarier in the world than someone whose goals you don't know," Senjogahara said. "As long as you have a clear view of someone's desires and ambitions, no matter how evil or powerful the person, you can start to come up with a plan."

Though maybe it just means she's an adult with a perspective that's different from little kids like us, she added, concerned.

She still worried about me.

The fact pained me.

Making her heart ache made mine ache as well. That said, I'd promised that I'd keep as few secrets as possible when it came to aberrations, so it wasn't as if I could hide anything from her.

I was causing her so much trouble all because she was going out with a guy like me—but putting it that way was so self-flagellating

that it circled around to sounding like a persecution complex.

“I’m not sure what Miss Gaen is fighting against…but it might just be that she’s fighting you, Araragi.”

Hm? What could that mean?

“No, I’m not trying to tell you anything in particular. It’s more like a hunch… I feel like your stance of only seeing what’s in front of you can’t avoid contradicting Miss Gaen’s God’s-eye view—or to use a somewhat harsher word, the two conflict.”

I couldn’t deny it when she worded it that way… Or rather, it had already played out in reality. I took up arms against Miss Gaen’s plan to install Shinobu as the deity of the godless Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—causing Sengoku, an unrelated middle schooler, to get wrapped up in the situation. Were you to see this as a conflict between me and Miss Gaen, it’d be scored as a total loss for Koyomi Araragi. One where I ended up with my tail between my legs…

That said, if Miss Gaen was planning something like that again—if she was plotting to install the now-complete Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade in that shrine, I’d surely take up arms against her again.

It seemed very possible.

Kita-Shirahebi Shrine’s predecessor had been located in that park, in an area then known as Shirohebi—in which case, the name meant water snake. And if sea snake meant the Hydra, all of this wasn’t just suggestive or a coincidence, but history itself…

Which would mean.

Hm? Wait, when did I learn that sea snakes meant the Hydra? Weren’t they totally different creatures? What was I talking about?

“Well, there’s not much I can say on the subject since I’m on your side, Araragi. But to put it in an encouraging way, while most people tend to support an all-encompassing perspective like Miss Gaen’s bird’s-eye view, I believe humans need a short-term view of a situation just about as much—forgoing a meal today and

wondering how to ring in next New Year's Day is nothing short of delusional, right?"

Her words were more consoling than encouraging, but hearing them did make me feel as though I could head into my confrontation with a confident, positive attitude—not that I had any idea who I'd be facing in this still-vague confrontation of mine.

"Now that we've savored our tea, why don't we move on to karaoke? Just to let you know in advance, I don't want you ordering any food. It'd detract from my date with my dad."

Her nighttime plans with her father had at last turned into a date—what kind of a double date was that? Actually, it felt more like a double booking at this point.

"I personally see it as a doubleheader."

Notwithstanding Senjogahara's baseball metaphor, unusual for a girl, we were headed not to the batting cages but a karaoke room.

I guess I'd yet to lose my innocent naïveté—I felt a little flustered being alone with Senjogahara in a small, dimly lit room, but shoving that feeling aside, I focused on her abilities as a vocalist. Incidentally, Hanekawa, a.k.a. the chairman of the world, was a ridiculously good singer.

She made me think I was listening to a CD.

Not only could she tackle her studies perfectly—she'd mastered recreation. I couldn't even go have fun with her if I didn't know what I was doing.

I didn't expect that level of singing from a regular date, though, and was sure that Senjogahara had been to karaoke with Hanekawa in the past. My girlfriend couldn't be thinking about competing with her…

Or so I carelessly thought, but it was of course Senjogahara who demanded concentration and preparation before anything involving fun. Operating the remote control with obvious inexperience, she set the karaoke machine to Score Mode.

Why corner herself like that?!

She wanted to get an objective number out of this!

The machine scores of people's singing and your impression of their skills were pretty disconnected, so I couldn't say for sure, but I was still going to have a hard time covering for her if her results were poor.

As I thought this…

"We'll have a two-hour face-off. Whoever gets the lower overall score has to show absolute submission to the winner," she said, adding that condition into the mix again.

I see, it was you that I was confronting the whole time…

Did she always love competing this much? Or more importantly, had this girl not learned her lesson after our bowling match?

Though I could learn something from the way she threw caution to the wind, I also didn't know if you could call this a date when she was throwing down so many gauntlets.

I had the creeping suspicion that I was being used as a practice partner for her evening date with her dad… Still, I had to meet her attempt to avenge her earlier loss.

I really am weak when I feel obliged to someone. Or rather, where I have a weakness.

Maybe it was just the weakness of a fool in love.

"I'll bat first. You just sit there and listen," Senjogahara said as she took the mic.

Something about the way she looked reminded me of a person in the grips of desperation.

"What are you talking about, Araragi? I appreciate how you bravely accepted my challenge, but you're going to regret this. Just how many times do you think I've sung the anime's theme song?"

That only went for the anime version.

Unfortunately, it didn't count in print.

And it's not like they're going to animate all the way up to this volume.

As for her song selection, it told me she was serious—I won't give the name because it might cause problems, but in spite of all her bragging, it was easy to sing and presented no hurdles in terms of either key or tempo.

Just how much did she want me to show absolute obedience to her?

It even felt like she was channeling her frustration over losing at bowling—and the result of all this…

"82 points."

Was average.

Well, I'd never used the scoring mode at karaoke before, so I couldn't tell if 82 was an average score, a good score, or a bad score.

For the singer in question, though, apparently it was a hopeless result that left her astonished.

"No way…an 82? That's a failing grade. This is the first score I've gotten in the low eighties in my entire life."

Talk about a model student…

What kind of test could you fail with an 82?

"Is this how you felt through most of high school? This is how it feels to score in the low eighties… I can't believe it. I'd never understood you. I needed to be kinder to you. What horrible things I must have said to you."

She was saying horrible things to me now. Maybe the most horrible thing yet…

I'd rarely managed to score even in the low eighties for the majority of my time in high school. I'd gotten nothing but actual failing grades.

As you might expect, no aspect of her singing was worth needling her over in particular, the karaoke machine's mechanical scoring aside—her ability to neatly complete any task showed that she was a match for Hanekawa.

And I voiced precisely that observation.

"I didn't ask for your condolement," I got in return—an unexpected rejection.

Getting rejected with a word I didn't even know… Did it mean what I think it did?

She really was competitive—my turn came next, but I think we can skip over the details. Nothing is more pathetic than a guy talking about his singing chops, so I'll just present you with my score, the way the machine did.

82.

82 points.

There is a kind of richness to be found in getting a tied score as a young couple on a date, and perhaps some kind of heartwarming message… But when I tried to say something about that, Senjogahara's intense expression and grinding teeth kept any words from leaving my mouth.

She was way too competitive… Or maybe this wasn't about competition, and the simple fact that she'd gotten the same score as me, her pupil, irritated her.

Whatever the case, according to the machine we were evenly matched singing talents.

Not just during the first round, either. Though we didn't score clean ties in the second round and onward, we continued to get just about the same score again and again.

A hard-fought, competitive match if this was some kind of sport, but it was just a karaoke battle, only leaving you with the despondent feeling of having won by a margin of error.

And so, as a result of margins of error.

I won yet again.

By a difference of three points how close could you get?

“Impossible… How could I lose to you not once, but twice in one day?”

My girlfriend seemed to look down on me quite a bit but that was to be expected when I’d always been showing her my pathetic side.

I offered to just call it a draw, but Senjogahara, competition personified, would not surrender her defeat.

“All right, give me whatever order you want,” she said.

What integrity.

Well, she needed to know that nothing more than a fine line separated her integrity from reckless abandon…

“This must be my comeuppance for plotting something as underhanded as choosing to go first in the hopes that we’d run out of time during a round before you had a chance to sing,” she casually revealed her dirty ruse.

Maybe that was really it.

The gods were watching that was a shabby ruse for them to watch.

But if we’re going to say that, there was no god in our town at the moment in any case.

The time had come for our date to end. Our last date as high schoolers.

We’d competed twice in the afternoon, and I’d ended up with a two-

win streak. There did seem to be a little bit of hostility in the air now, but it felt like we'd made progress in the sense that everything had gone according to plan. There was even a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

"Hold on a second, Araragi. Why are you acting like this is over? Don't wrap it all up. You haven't given me an order yet, have you? Make me show my absolute obedience."

…

Well, a promise was a promise. It'd be ridiculous to drag it out, anyway.

That said, the idea of searching my vocabulary to find a demand even more wholesome than walking arm in arm did seem pretty tough.

"What about a bridal carry until we get to the parking lot?" suggested the girlfriend needing to show her absolute obedience.

I had to wonder if this was another case of her getting the same thing whether she won or lost, but maybe it was an acceptable compromise.

"Just to make sure, you know I mean you holding me in a bridal carry, not me carrying you like some sort of princess, right?"

The other way around would make it a groomal carry or something. What a punishment that'd be□though a bridal carry was already punishment enough. However, I'd go along with it because I felt it'd do more damage to Senjogahara than to me.

"Just know that I'm going to kill you if you say I'm heavy."

It'd been so long since I last heard Senjogahara say the words I'm going to kill you…but it didn't make them any more romantic.

Her weight aside, I was a bit worried about my arm strength now that I'd lost all traces of my vampirism. It'd be a real problem if I dropped her, so I told her to put her arms around my neck. Then we traveled a few hundred yards to the parking lot in a bridal carry.

“Impressive, Araragi. I can tell you’re used to picking up little girls.”

That phrasing was going to give people the wrong idea.

Please stop.

“But if Shinobu is all big and busty now, it won’t be easy for you to carry her on your back, in your arms, or atop your shoulders. You’re going to need to train.”

I really didn’t see myself carrying around a fully recovered Shinobu… The mental image was a lot.

Chatting, subject to curious glances, the two of us arrived at the parking space where we’d parked our rental car for the afternoon—I at least got her to let me pay for parking.

“Phew. That was embarrassing,” Senjogahara said as soon as she was in the driver’s seat.

That was her impression of my bridal carry?

Not that I could do much but agree…

“I caught a glimpse of hell there.”

She was going that far?

But I guess hell hadn’t been as hellish.

There was nothing left to do but head back now—seeing Senjogahara drive made me feel like maybe I should get a license too, and not just because she’d told me to.

Of course, the joy she seemed to be feeling might not have come from driving, but from thoughts of her upcoming date with Daddy…

Well, even if you do have a license, you need a car before you can go out whenever you feel like it… I didn’t know about going through the trouble of renting a car, either.

We just had to head back now—or so I say, but just in time, I remembered I had something I needed to tell her.

At first, I thought I needed to tell her at the start of the day, and it was in fact something I needed to tell her at the start of the day, but regrettably I'd lost my chance, overwhelmed by her acquisition of a driver's license.

She hadn't said anything, so the wicked notion that I might get away with not saying it did pass through my mind for a moment, but I of course couldn't do that.

"Senjogahara," I began abruptly, "there's something important I have to tell you."

"If you're going to ask me to marry you, my answer is sure."

"No, not that important. And that was way too ready of you. Actually, it's about reciprocating for those chocolates you gave me during Valentine's Day… I couldn't get anything for you." I'd run over different ways of putting it, but in the end, I just had to give her the honest truth. "I'm sorry, I didn't have time to get anything. I kept thinking about it until I realized I'd overthought it… I might have been able to get you some off-the-shelf marshmallows in time if I really tried, but I didn't know about that, either… And I kept overthinking things until I'd over-overthought them, and I was paralyzed…"

Finding an opening today and buying them seemed like an option, but no such luck—I shouldn't have expected any gaps when I was dealing with Senjogahara. The planetarium had offered an opportunity…but I was sleeping just like her then.

"So could you wait for another two or three days? I'll be sure to add interest."

"Oh, you were worrying yourself over something like that? Forget it. Interest? I know just how much you hate special days, Araragi." In contrast to my own tenseness, Senjogahara's response was muted. "It'd sound bad if I said I wasn't expecting anything, but it's not like I thought you had something for me. Spending a whole day on this

date with me is enough. If you feel like giving me something, then give me something. It's not like I made you chocolates expecting anything in return."

Though I had trouble accepting this from someone as fussy about her debts as Senjogahara, maybe gifts weren't a part of that from the start.

"In fact, I was only able to build this relationship with you because you hate special days□remember? We started dating on Mother's Day."

"Oh, now that you mention it…"

I did remember. I also recalled that I'd gotten in a fight with my little sisters over whether or not I'd celebrate Mother's Day. I'd bolted out of our house.

I saw now how childish I'd been…but I happened to encounter Senjogahara in that park eventually.

And after that, she told me she liked me.

Oh.

It really was my dislike of Mother's Day that led to me dating Senjogahara□and I couldn't help but feel that relationships are such an odd thing.

To think that a fight with my little sisters would come to hold that much importance… Considering that I got along somewhat well with them now, I did sometimes look back in regret and wish that I'd started acting friendlier with them sooner. If I had, though, I wouldn't have run into Senjogahara, or even Hachikuji, that day…

How profoundly odd.

If mistakes were inevitable on an unyielding path of righteousness, were they also capable of leading to what's right?

…Had I also heard this line of thinking somewhere before?

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to become the kind of annoying girl who demands that her boyfriend celebrate every special day… I’m the only one who needs to remember anniversaries, anyway. Like how you caught me on May eighth, and how I told you how I feel and started dating you on May fourteenth, and how we went on our first date and had our first kiss on June thirteenth, and how we had our first French kiss on…”

“I’d say you’re being plenty annoying!”

Or just scary.

Of course, it may have had to do with her excellent memory instead.

“Sadly, even though we’ve been in the same class since our first year of high school, I don’t remember my first impression of you… I do remember that you always got in fights with Miss Oikura. Do you know of any good way to alter my memories to say that I’d always had a crush on you? Maybe I should falsify my diary.”

“I remember you during first year well… You were like a cloistered princess.”

“What? Are you going to say you always had a crush on me?”

“I won’t go that far…”

There’s no way to change the past, so we’d have to rely that much more on our hopes for the future□but in any case, while I could deal with complaints or anger over not having a present ready for Senjogahara, I was just relieved that she didn’t feel hurt.

“It’s okay. I’m getting a White Day gift from my dad.”

Those words gave me pause, but even so, I was glad we didn’t seem to have a problem.

She said I could give her something if I felt like it, and of course I was going to feel like it. I appreciated this grace period□in fact, I’d also received chocolates from Hanekawa, as a friend, so I needed to think of what to get her as well. (Did you need to give friends three

times as much back too?) If she'd be back by graduation, I needed to have Senjogahara's ready by then too. I'd called it a grace period, but it was just a day or two long at most.

"Mmh."

And then, the moment I relaxed.

Something seemed to come to Senjogahara—and she immediately stepped on the brakes and stopped the car on the side of the road. From the passenger's seat, though, I didn't know what it was, and gulped at the abrupt, surging twist.

"Araragi," Senjogahara said—her tone changed.

Deeper, deeper, deeper, deep.

I could sense none of the tolerance she'd been showing.

"I don't think I can forgive this."

"Huh?"

"To think you have nothing at all for your girlfriend on White Day, of all days, one of the three great lovers' days. I can't help but doubt your love."

"Huh? Whaa?"

"I've heard of men who stop caring about girls the moment they start dating, but I never imagined you were one of them. I'm so disappointed. I couldn't hide my dejection even if I wanted to. I'd been waiting all day to see just what kind of surprise you had for me, my heart pounding, fluttering, and trembling all at once, yet you hadn't prepared anything at all. It'd be generous to describe this as you giving me the slip. I'd convinced myself you'd at least give me a cabin cruiser."

"W-Wouldn't you say your expectations were a bit too mega-sized?"

"Ahh. Maybe I'll kill myself."

Senjogahara jokingly leaned against the steering wheel—she'd added so much flair to her performance that it just looked like a skit to me now…

I wanted to tell her to learn from Tadatsuru's example. He'd shown me what a true farce is.

What could have come to her to launch this one-woman sideshow? I wondered, but I certainly couldn't ignore it.

"S-Sorry, but that's why I'm apologizing," I had to respond. "Please don't kill yourself. O-Okay, then what'll it take for you to forgive me? I can't get you a pleasure boat, but if it's anything I can do…"

I of course couldn't help but find it strange that she'd flipped around on something she'd already forgiven, but when it came down to it, I was the one in the wrong here without a doubt. I had to take my lumps like a training dummy.

"Did you just say you'd do anything?" Senjogahara pounced.

Seizing on my words—as if I'd played right into her hand.

Why did she look the happiest I'd seen her all day… If this made her happier than anything, what exactly had we been doing today?

"Did you just say absolute submission?"

"N-No, I didn't say that?"

"…"

"I did. I did say it. Those were the exact words out of my mouth, absolute submission."

By the way, when Senjogahara was "…"-ing, she looked like she was going to cry. Her face was becoming so expressive, she'd be able to find work as a quick-change artist.

But now I understood, this was how desperate she was to force me into absolute submission—she'd used this opportunity to try whatever she'd been attempting during bowling and karaoke.

Maybe not the intertwined arms, but the bridal carry did seem like she'd gotten what she wanted, though… Did she really want to demand something from me so much that she was willing to go back on her forgiveness? What terrible tenacity.

Did she want to make some kind of erotic demand? No, looking back on it now, that must have been a spur-of-the-moment joke…

"I see. Yes, that's the kind of generous man I fell in love with. You've won my heart all over again."

"…"

It seemed that I'd managed to accomplish my goal of recaptivating my girlfriend's heart at the last possible moment. But I couldn't be mindlessly happy when these could be, well, my last moments…

"You don't even know what I'm going to request, and you still said you'd swear absolute obedience to it for the rest of your life."

"The rest of my life?!"

Didn't life-long absolute obedience go beyond the definition of a request? I'd call that signing myself into slavery, or maybe giving her carte blanche over my life, or whatever else you'd call giving Hitagi Senjogahara an unthinkable amount of control.

N-No. I was going to believe in her.

I would believe in Hitagi Senjogahara, my girlfriend.

Who wasn't the problematic person she once was.

She wouldn't ask for anything absurd! Though it was already pretty absurd if she wanted me to follow it for the rest of my life.

"Y-Yeah. The rest of my life. Okay. What do I need to do?"

"Call me by my name."

For the rest of your life, Senjogahara said□her expression changed.

She simply blushed.

“I want you to use my name.”

“What? I already do. I call you Senjogahara, don’t I?”

“No, I mean my first name. Just my first name.”

“…”

Her request.

It must’ve been something she couldn’t make happen during our first date—and that she wanted to make happen while we were still high school students.

As boyfriend and girlfriend.

So that’s why she set up punishments during bowling and karaoke. This was what she wanted.

Yes, it would become a high school regret.

Yes, it was embarrassing after all this time.

Something she could only say given the opportunity—absolute obedience for the rest of my life.

I’d keep calling her by her first name for the rest of my life.

I—I wanted to, just as much.

I wished for it just as much.

“Hitagi.”

Thank you, Koyomi.

I didn’t need to say another word for Hitagi to understand how I

felt and so she did the same for me.

009

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

I escorted Hitagi back to her home—or rather, I just sat in her passenger's seat, so I guess she was doing the escorting—before walking back to the Araragi residence in the now fully darkened night, only to experience déjà vu.

A feeling—that this had happened the day before, too.

To expand, a shadowy figure lay in wait for me in front of my home—it was too dark for me to make out the perp's identity, but it couldn't have been Hitagi, as we'd just parted ways.

Who could it be, I thought as I approached. Had Ononoki worried about me and come out? Or maybe it was my sisters? And then I saw.

The dark shadow—was Ogi Oshino.

It was Ogi.

"Hey there—I've been waiting for you. I've gotten tired of waiting for you. I've gotten tired just waiting for you," she said, sounding like her uncle—she was wearing the same easy, flippant smirk too. "How was it? Did you enjoy your last date with Miss Senjogahara? I did try to be considerate, and kept from forcing my way into the real world. I think that deserves some gratitude," she appended with a shrug.

"I am grateful…but why call that our last date? It was just our last date as high schoolers."

"Is it, now. Yes, that'd be nice—it'd be nice if you two had a future."

"…"

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I really do feel that way, you know. Please don’t twist my words around. Despite all I am. It’s just that I have these silly thoughts that there may be a number of factors that could call that into question—okay? Whatever happens, though, I can’t imagine you having any regrets.”

Ha haa, laughed Ogi.

And then.

“Hey, Araragi-senpai?” she continued. “There’s one thing I wanted to ask you, just for reference—what are you planning on doing next?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, exactly what I said. Don’t overthink it. The question is a changed-around version of what being right means—or maybe a change-up, or maybe an extrapolation.”

“An extra…”

“And I suppose a case of extra innings.”

What does it mean to be right.

That’s it. She’d asked me before—and told me we’d pick it back up when we met again.

Where could she have said that?

If not in the real world—then in a dream?

Or maybe in hell?

“Ogi. Did you try to get rid of me? Did you ask an expert to do something like that?”

“Oh, did someone tell you that? A groundless rumor like that? What a sad piece of misinformation—please allow me to explain myself. I would never do anything to harm you,” Ogi replied, her voice calm, showing no signs of being shaken. “Remember what I said? I’m

expecting you to make the right decision, and walk away and not fall for Miss Gaen's sweet talk."

"You did?"

Well, if she was saying she said it, she must have.

Even if she hadn't, my reply would be the same. I only had one answer to give her, whether it was right or wrong.

"But I can't—abandoning Shinobu and Hachikuji isn't a choice I can make. There's no room for choice, no room in my heart for that. I might not know what it means to be right, but I do know the path I need to take."

"I do wish you wouldn't rush to conclusions—but, well, I suppose so. I wasn't expecting a positive reply, I just thought I'd try asking. Still, it's disappointing," Ogi said, not sounding the least bit disappointed. "Personally, I'd ask you to bow out around now—would I be overstepping my boundaries if I insisted? Oh, by the way. May I correct you about something you might be getting wrong?"

"Something I'm getting wrong? Like…what?"

"I'm not the Darkness."

"!"

I was surprised—but I think I managed to hide it.

I had trouble keeping my composure, though.

The shock came not so much from the words themselves but the fact that Ogi was speaking them.

This junior of mine had made plenty of borderline statements—but this one stepped right over the line.

Almost like a declaration of war, like a signal announcing the start of a battle.

Yet she showed no sign of realizing that she'd made an extraordinarily important statement.

"By the way," she changed the subject with ease. The way she switched topics was so skillful that I almost believed I'd misheard her earlier words. "Do you not have anything for me?"

"Hm? Uh…have any what?"

"Any White Day presents for me. I gave you chocolates, remember? Godivas."

"Godivas…"

Had she given me something that expensive?

I had no recollection, but if she said she did, I must have just forgotten about it—how pathetic of a boy was I to have forgotten?

"Ha haa. From the looks of it, you must not have anything for me—too bad," Ogi lamented, actually looking disappointed this time.

The sight made my heart ache.

"In that case, why don't I make a request of you instead, the way Miss Senjogahara did—what do you say?"

I didn't know how she'd learned about the agreement we'd made as a couple, but how could I say no? I couldn't make light of it, whatever it might be. If her request was for me to bow out, though, I of course intended to reject it flat-out.

But Ogi's request was of a different kind altogether—or maybe along the same line, but in the exact opposite direction.

"You may have no regrets now that you've gone to hell and on a date—but I still have one regret when it comes to this town."

"A regret?"

"A regret. Business left unfinished—that I was born in order to

finish. I have a firm purpose, and a firm sense of purpose.”

Surprising as that may be, Ogi said.

I listened in silence.

To her purpose. To her sense of purpose.

“I’m prepared to die to accomplish it—do you have a goal you’d be willing to die for? I do. Just one more. Which is why I have to accomplish it, whatever it takes—but that’s why Izuko Gaen, the boss of all the experts, would pick this one place to lay a trap. Yes, I know. I know, and yet my only option is to set off this trap—I just have to suck it up and accept the counterattack.”

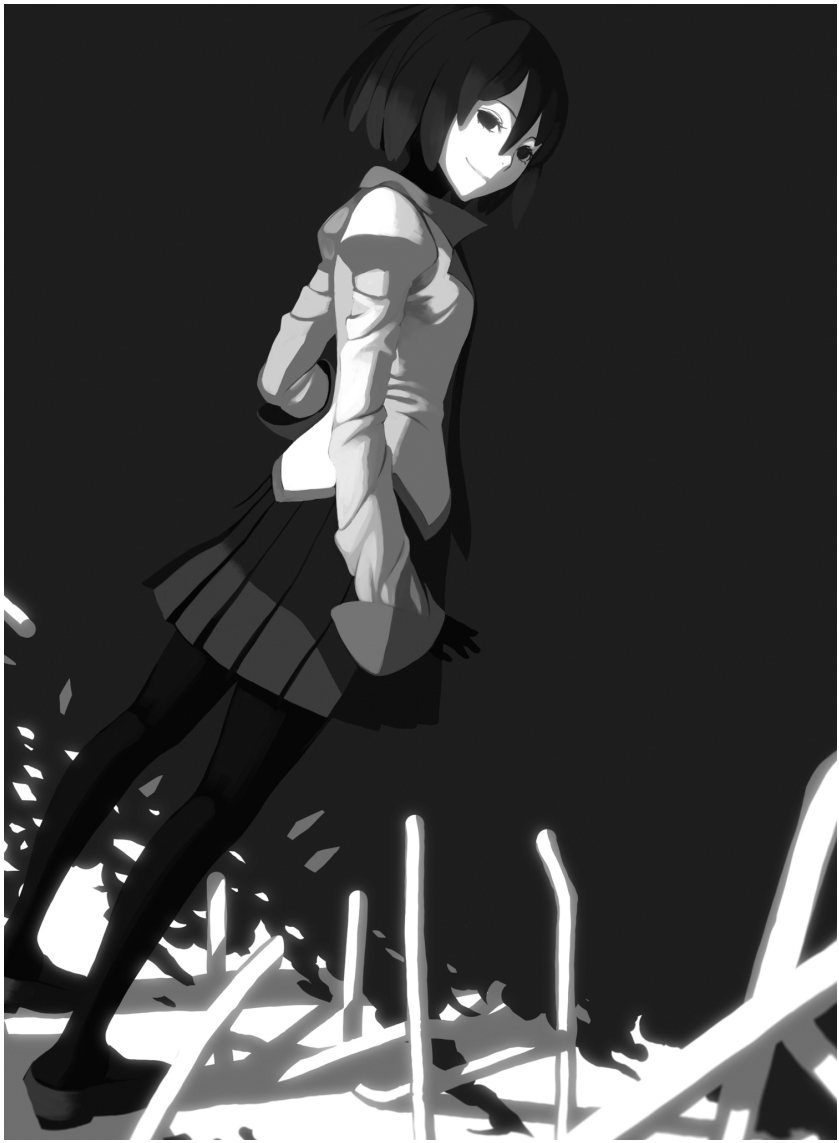
“…”

“In other words, I’m about to go face-to-face and fight the lady who knows everything, no tricks involved—Araragi-senpai. Could you side with me when I do?”

Please save me, Ogi Oshino said with an innocuous smile.

CHAPTER SEVEN
OGI DARK

OGIOSHINO



001

The present exists thanks to Ogi Oshino's presence—I, and we, have been able to make it to now because that enigmatic, unidentifiable mystery wrapped in a mystery stayed here in our town.

We have the present—as well as a future.

I'm sure the day will come when I'm able to see things that way—I can't yet, and I find it hard to believe that day will ever come when I consider what she did, what she carried out, but I'm certain that in the future, I will look back on her in that way.

That's the kind of person I am.

And that's who she is, too.

Ogi Oshino.

I'll remember her and think—she symbolized my youth.

Yes—I think the very first thing I'll recall when I reminisce about Koyomi Araragi during his high school days will not be Hitagi Senjogahara, nor Suruga Kanbaru, nor Shinobu Oshino or Mayoi Hachikuji, but Ogi Oshino's smile.

I had no idea what she was thinking.

What was so funny.

I didn't know her goals or her history.

The grinning girl's smile.

No, I already knew at that moment exactly why she always smiled so much—she must have been amused by my folly.

I was a great source of amusement, a fool who couldn't begin to see who she really was—in fact, it's hard not to smirk.

I find myself smiling.

I find myself bursting into laughter.

So maybe it was all a laughing matter in the end.

The way I spent my youth.

The way I spent my last year in high school.

The year that began with a chance encounter with a legendary vampire—that trying, tragic, painful, ugly, hopeless year that I'd look back on some day.

And talk about to someone, convey to everyone.

Tell the tale of.

As a laughing matter to be told with a smile, a shallow narrative of self-love—perhaps.

"Perhaps? I think we already know the answer to that—not that I know," I know Ogi would say. "It's you who knows—Araragi-senpai."

Yes.

I did know—I must have even known Ogi Oshino's true identity very well, from the very start.

Laughable, isn't it?

002

If I closed my eyes and thought back, I could recall many of the varied surreal images that I'd encountered over the past year—I don't plan to list them all out after we've come this far, but the sight I faced this night, which is to say the night of March fourteenth, after my date with Hitagi ended and the sun had set, could not be outdone by any of them as a summation of surreality.

I was in a park.

Yes—a park whose name I didn't know how to read for the longest time, which turned out to be not Rohaku or Namishiro, but Shirohebi due to misreadings and misprints throughout the years. I'd discovered it was Shirohebi Park a day ago, when I was in the depths of hell, but in any case, this sight was found in the park's plaza.

A game of baseball.

Or maybe I should call it a pretend game of baseball, since they were far from having enough people on each team—in any case, the roles of pitcher, batter, and catcher had been assigned as three individuals amused themselves by playing at baseball.

Baseball in the park.

That in itself could be called wholesome, but the characters at play and their tools made the scene surreal. A kind of surreality lacking in reality.

The pitcher was Miss Izuko Gaen.

A lady who despite donning a baseball cap-esque cap also wore loose and baggy clothing that seemed unsuited to any athletic endeavor. Someone with a thin body and, despite her youthful looks, a full-fledged adult you'd never expect to see playing

innocently in a park.

The batter was Shinobu Oshino.

While it'd be one thing if she was playing in the little-girl form she'd taken until not long ago, she was now a woman of exceptional beauty, tall with long limbs and long blond hair, in a gorgeous dress, so dazzling she literally drew your eyes to her. What's more, she wore stiletto heels as she held a metal bat and waited on one leg for the ball to come, the very picture of a sewing machine on a dissecting table. So unbalanced it seemed like a dissecting table on a sewing machine.

I made one mistake there. A thoughtless mistake.

Not a bat. The long object she held in her hands as if she was going to row a boat with it was no metal bat—it was a Japanese greatsword.

A blade that even an amateur could tell was forged by a master.

Its name Kokorowatari, commonly known as the Aberration Slayer.

In that sense, she did appear to be a demon wielding a metal bat, but more the type you'd expect to see in hell—a genuine vampire who had regained her full nature, healthy in body and spirit this eve as she looked truly refreshed playing this night game.

That said, this king of the aberrations did appear to be fine the morning before on the grounds of Kita-Shirahebi shrine, so the noble and legendary and all-powerful vampire—the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire in her complete form seemed to endure the sun's rays just fine so long as her defense was up.

"C'mon now, pitcher. You're looking scared to me."

The individual who pounded her mitt while for some reason aggressively heckling the pitcher, the position to whom she should have been playing the role of a loving wife, was the only one of the three whose age didn't make her out of place playing baseball in a park. A young girl, with pigtails—Mayoi Hachikuji.

She played catcher despite wearing a skirt, crouching down with her knees spread and showing the whole world her underwear.

How to explain it. Maybe her guard was too far down?

Seeing those panties brought me no joy at all.

In fact, in terms of bare fundamentals, she should have at least taken off her backpack when playing baseball—or maybe it was the backpack that allowed her to maintain her balance despite her unstable pose.

This sight was already as surreal as can be, but what made it super-surreal was the fact they used a rock of reasonable size as their ball.

A rock?

They were throwing rocks and hitting them with swords?

What kind of a baseball game was this?

I know that it's often described as a duel, but they were taking it too far.

As a common, upstanding citizen, I wanted to report this sight to the authorities the moment I saw it, but it involved people I knew—or rather, it consisted only of people I knew, so my plan was to pretend not to see it, turn around, and head back. I could even try to meet up with Senjogahara during her daddy date, but—

"Nope," the tween girl next to me said.

Ononoki stopped me—her fingers scissoring my sleeve. Stopped in such an adorable way, even someone as renowned for his bravery as myself couldn't help but halt.

To say nothing of the fact that Ononoki possessed great and powerful strength in spite of looking like a cute little doll. Even a scissoring of my clothes with her fingers had enough stopping power to make it feel like I'd been pinned to the ground by a stake.

"Aren't you settling this tonight?"

“Well, yeah…”

“I can’t be of any help to you now that Big Sis is gone□but I will at least watch you fight, kind monster sir. So,” said Ononoki, Let’s hurry up and join their circle.

Though it seemed one would need extraordinary courage to join this circle, I couldn’t cower, urged by a girl who appeared to be half my size, regardless of whatever resided in her.

I stepped on the field□or rather, into the park’s plaza.

“Ah! Why, if ’tis not my master!”

Shinobu seemed to be the first to notice.

Beautiful, graceful, shining there in her elegance□this gorgeous blond woman with a perfect body who simply could not be captured in full by any number of flowery words gave me an innocent wave of her hand (well, of her sword) as she called to me, so of course I felt embarrassed, or rather, just flustered.

“How late ye are! How we’ve awaited thee□we were playing cricket courtesy of all the time we found on our hands!”

So it was cricket? The progenitor of baseball? You could say without exaggeration that I didn’t know a thing about cricket as a sport.

“Ha!“Haha!“Hahahaha!” she laughed.

Shinobu came running over, held me up in her arms, and spun me around□kind of like a professional wrestler’s giant swing, or even the way an adult would play with a child, but there existed such a difference in height between the two of us now that this was possible.

I had found our physiques reversed.

And aren’t you in high spirits today, Miss Shinobu.

The last time I saw her this excited may have been back during

spring break.

I recalled how that past excitement, too, expressed the joy of having regained her full abilities… It seemed that being complete is something to be happy about.

As Shinobu literally threw me around, Hachikuji and Ononoki looked on with choice expressions.

Me getting my just desserts, the sight of me being treated the way I always treated them, may have felt more pathetic than anything.

Maybe like the feeling of seeing someone scary with power over you kowtowing to someone even scarier with even more power? In that sense, though, this treatment may have been justifiable revenge from Shinobu's perspective.

An exhilarating tale of revenge.

To the point that I almost enjoyed it.

Of course, in some ways I couldn't even complain if she'd gone the full nine yards and carried me in her arms and on her back, considering the way I used to treat the young Shinobu.

Now that she'd returned to her full form, though, it seemed that her heart may have grown as big as the rest of her; she released me after having her fill.

Shinobu had mentioned earlier that her outward appearance affected her behavior, so as sad as it was for me, it seemed she couldn't talk to me the way she did while she was a little girl.

Then again, given that she now appeared to be twenty-seven years old, it'd be beyond ultra-surreal if she acted like that little girl.

That Shinobu was gone, but she now felt like a high-spirited cousin I was meeting during summer break.

"H-Hachikuji…"

Though fully toyed with, played with, and robbed of my balance, I

still reached out to the young girl before me□but come to think of it, Hachikuji had passed out as soon as I kidnapped her out of hell, so this would in fact be the first time in six months that I was facing her in the real world.

I was very disappointed that I couldn't hug her like always thanks to the way the world spun around me.

"I think you did that more than enough back in hell, didn't you, Mister Dark-and-Stormy?"

"However cool that sounds, Hachikuji, don't make me sound like the opening of a Gothic novel. You'll give people the wrong idea. My name is Araragi."

"I'm sorry. A slip of the tongue."

"No, you're doing it on purpose…"

"A tip of the tongue."

"Or maybe not?!"

"A foul tip when she swung."

"I guess that's something you'd care about as a catcher, but still!"

Fortunately, our time apart seemed to have no effect at all on this interaction of ours.

Though we did also do this in hell.

"I thought you'd be close to out of ways your tongue could slip, but I guess there's more than expected…"

"I have to say, it really does hit home in a different way when it's real-world."

"Could you not call the world of the living real-world?"

What was hell then, virtual reality?

Like the way you called a brick-and-mortar bookseller a real

bookstore these days?

I couldn't support it.

"It's nice to see you again as well, Miss Ononoki. Thank you for your earlier kindness."

"Yeah. I'm glad you're back," Ononoki said.

I didn't know what kind of position she took as she made this reply (even whether or not she was talking down to Hachikuji)—but right, it had also been a full half-year since the two had met like this.

Though I was ecstatic at the time over the tween girl, little girl, and young girl having assembled in one place (what kind of a person was I?), Shinobu had completed a sudden growth spurt, and looked different.

Speaking of which, though, I wondered—there was something I needed to check on. In fact, I should have checked the previous day.

I reached out toward Hachikuji's chest.

She ran away.

"What's wrong, Hachikuji?"

"I ought to be asking the same about your brain. Why were you so calmly attempting to grab a handful of my still-growing bosom?"

"No, I was just wondering how your body was doing—I grabbed you out of hell without thinking, but does that mean you're alive again like me? Or could it be that…"

"That's right, Koyomin. It could be."

From up on the pitcher's mound, Miss Gaen had been watching our little skit like an adult—not that she stood on any physically raised ground—but now she interrupted us.

Given her position, it felt like she'd picked me off.

“I’m sad to report that in Hachikuji’s case, her body has been cremated, you see□heh, but she might be a nasty sight had she been buried. Like a zombie, or maybe a jiangshi□but in any case, she is now a ghost, just as she was when you first met her in this park.”

A ghost.

She dropped the rock she held straight onto the ground as she said this.

“I made sure to take a close look into the situation today because of the possibility this raises. Around the time you and Miss Senjogahara were on your love-date, Koyomin.”

“Love-date…”

What a way to put it.

It wasn’t anything that saccharine, either.

It was a little more bloodcurdling than that. Bizarre would be another word.

Still, I understood□of course it wouldn’t be that picture-perfect. Then again, depending on how you saw it, you could debate whether Hachikuji coming back to life was a good thing or a bad thing□she’d died eleven years ago, so even if she did return to life after all this time, she’d be just as lost in the world as she was as a ghost.

In fact, she may have had even fewer places to go had she come back to life and been bound to a physical body.

Still.

It was better than hell, right? I thought so but□

“Still, Hachikuji. I’m sorry,” I bowed my head to her. Or maybe I should say I hung my head in shame. “I brought you back here without thinking□but now that I am thinking about it, I ruined the six months of work you did stacking rocks in children’s limbo. Jizo or some other figure should’ve come and reincarnated you if you’d

kept at it…”

And yet, I forced Hachikuji to escape all because I couldn’t bear to see her like that—and yet, she would be the one paying any price for my actions, not me.

A punishment she wouldn’t have even brought upon herself this time around.

“It’s fine, Mister Araragi. There’s no need for you to worry—I’ve already discussed that matter with Miss Gaen and come to a deal.”

“A deal?”

With Miss Gaen?

Hearing this brought a wave of anxiety over me—making me look back at Miss Gaen, but she only shrugged, as if to play stupid.

“I’m not bothered in any way by you rescuing me,” Hachikuji continued. “Hell was indeed hell. If I’m being honest with you, when I saw that thread of salvation dangling down from the heavens, I wanted to climb it so badly I even thought about pushing you aside.”

“That’s a pretty terrible thought you had.”

Social climbers are bad enough, but that?

She must be joking, of course—I had trouble ridding myself of my guilty conscience even after hearing this.

“All right, we can cover that as well, so why don’t we get this briefing started—Koyomin did show up, after all. Let’s get through this fast, since we’re going to wrap everything up today. So for now, Koyomin—do you think you could order your beautiful, all-grown-up slave to stop bullying my junior’s shikigami?”

I looked over.

And found Shinobu Oshino throttling Yotsugi Ononoki for no discernible reason. For no good reason at all, in fact—just as

Ononoki feared, Shinobu seemed to be in the midst of paying her back for the verbal abuse she'd suffered in the summer.

I take back my previous statement.

Whatever form she took, adult or complete, whatever the case, whatever the situation, my partner seemed to always have the same nasty personality.

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While I guess it'd be an overstatement to call us bitter enemies brought together by fate, I couldn't help but feel that we were a ragtag bunch—still, you could also call our group an all-star cast, considering how incredible its members were. The unavoidable incohesive feeling among us, though, must have come from something between us—the way our differences contrasted so poorly.

Shinobu Oshino—a perfected legendary vampire who had flown in from overseas.

Mayoi Hachikuji—a ghost who'd returned from hell.

Yotsugi Ononoki—a shikigami of a corpse doll whose master had absconded.

Izuko Gaen—an expert aberration exterminator, and the big boss of those in her field.

Then there was me, Koyomi Araragi, former human, former vampire, and current human—it was hard to tell whether our interests lined up with one another or not, or whether we all acted with the same purpose, so I guess if you took an objective look at us, we were nothing but a bunch of weirdos gathered in a park.

"Don't worry, I haven't forgotten to put a barrier up. No outsiders will be able to enter. We've got this place to ourselves for the time being," Miss Gaen said with cheer.

A barrier, huh… I'd gotten pretty used to hearing that word.

We all moved from the plaza to the benches.

Miss Gaen sat Ononoki on her lap.

Her expressionless face made it hard to tell, but Ononoki did seem a bit uncomfortable—I wasn't sure whether or not dolls had feelings, but that feeling did come across to me.

As someone in a similar situation, sitting on the adult Shinobu's lap, her arms around me.

I could find no excuse to reject this position as I'd regrettably done the same thing to Shinobu countless times in the past. Still, being held on an older woman's lap when I was about to graduate high school did make me feel self-conscious, or embarrassed, or stop it Hachikuji I don't want you looking at me like that.

Shinobu had wrapped her arms around my torso like it was the most natural thing to do in the world, holding me tight and making sure she didn't drop me—her chin resting on top of my head.

Miss Gaen held Ononoki, Shinobu held me, and Hachikuji sat alone on the bench—there were only five of us, of course, so one would be left out by necessity if we formed two-person groups. I still wanted to place Hachikuji on the lap of my now-held body and hold her myself, but she may have been wary about that exact possibility, as she'd placed herself some distance away from me, in a position that my immobile self couldn't reach as if to say she welcomed being left out.

We were a strange enough group to begin with, but our arrangement was bizarre as well. I could see why Miss Gaen put a barrier up, because someone could have very easily called the authorities on us at first glance otherwise.

"Okay, then. Now I'm going to disclose the plan I've spent yesterday and today painstakingly putting together to all of you—and I'd appreciate it if you do as I say, but I of course won't force you to. There is something I want to check before that, though. Did you bring what I told you to bring, Koyomin?"

"I did. Still, this thing was yours to begin with, so I only wanted to return it to you… I don't know what you're thinking, but I want you to know that I didn't bring this thing here because I agree with whatever it is you are thinking," I said, taking out a long envelope

and handing it to Miss Gaen—in fact, it was something I'd tried to rip up and throw away many times before, but couldn't. I didn't have the courage, and I doubt I had the skill.

Perhaps Shinobu could eat its contents, now that she was back to her full strength—but that too was a thought that inspired fear and trembling.

Because what the thing sealed.

Was—a god.

"Yes. That's fine with me, Koyomin. What I'm expecting from you is one of your miracles that not even reason can explain," the lady who knows everything said, as though she knew it all, and removed the contents of the envelope—a talisman.

A paper amulet with a snake drawn on it.

No plain amulet, as its effects had already been tested and proved—an all-powerful amulet that once took Nadeko Sengoku, an everyday middle schooler, and made her ascend into becoming a snake god.

A slip of paper entrusted to me by Miss Gaen immediately after the events following summer break. I'd failed to make full use of it.

It'd sound cooler if I said I didn't use it out of choice, but in reality, I got cold feet and was too afraid to use it.

"Yes, indeed—it's well preserved. It seems you took good care of it," Miss Gaen said, slipping the removed ofuda right into her pocket. She handled it roughly—without care. I guess she wouldn't be afraid of doing so as an expert, though… Wait, but shouldn't she be paying more respect to it as an expert?

I just couldn't understand her stance.

"Hmph," Shinobu breathed.

As if she felt somewhat disgusted—she'd suffered because of that amulet back when she had a child's body, and maybe she'd

remembered those times.

Or so I thought, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"Really—'twas exactly as thou saidst. In fact, how could I not have noticed? It did take place quite far in the past, of course—and I did not want to recall it, either," she said, not making any sense to me.

It seemed that Hachikuji hadn't been the only one to come to a deal with Miss Gaen while I was off on my date with Senjogahara—I couldn't help but feel a little left out now.

So I was the one on the outside, not Hachikuji.

I wondered if Ononoki might be feeling the same way, but she remained expressionless, looking absentminded if anything.

Maybe she didn't care either way.

"No need for ye to fret—'tis not as though I've heard everything myself. Merely the essentials—and I decided to wait until we met before hearing this expert's detailed plans on what she will do next, in particular," Shinobu said, as if she'd sensed my alienation—regardless of the fact that our physical and spiritual link had been severed.

"That's right. And also, I was still piecing together my stratagems during the daytime, so I couldn't talk about them even if I'd wanted to—I only finished planning just now after hearing about the situation from Hachikuji and Shinobu."

I'm sorry to say I had trouble believing Miss Gaen—I even doubted whether this soon-to-be disclosed plan she'd spent yesterday and today putting together was even that.

At this point, I wouldn't have been surprised if she said this had been her plan ever since August—but who was making me think something like that? Ogi?

Ogi Oshino.

"Ogi Oshino," Miss Gaen began. "She is the enemy we will now

face the opponent we must fight. The target we must eliminate, and the object we must detest right, Koyomin?"

"…"

Enemy. I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable when I heard her say the word out loud I just couldn't get the image of her as one of my juniors out of my head.

Regardless of what Tadatsuru said.

And whatever she herself said.

"Ye seem unsurprised. Had ye known from the start, after all?" Shinobu said as she held me tight from behind, but sadly she was off the mark here and giving me too much credit. I'd never once doubted Ogi.

But.

Just maybe, I had known.

I didn't know anything.

But maybe I knew about Ogi.

I thought this as I felt Shinobu at my back.

"…"

Ononoki maintained her silence.

Maybe she knew her place, held there on the lap of the woman who was her owner's senior, Miss Gaen, and was holding back…but that didn't seem to be in Ononoki's personality.

I could see her interrupting our conversation as she pleased wherever she was sitting, especially after all the influence the uninhibited characters who were my little sisters had on her.

"This is a very important point, though… We must not forget that the name Ogi Oshino is merely an expedient. The most haphazardly

chosen of aliases—no, it wouldn't be accurate to call it an alias, but something like a user ID selected in order to avoid being bound by a name."

Bound by a name?

That was—something I'd heard before.

When Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade lost her existence as such—she had been given the new name of Shinobu Oshino, a name by which she was bound, or something. It did seem that this binding continued to be in effect even now that she'd regained her existence, though…

"You see, Ogi Oshino's true essence is found in that unknowability—the lone trait we could say she has is the way she loses her own identity… Well, even she, the pronoun we've been using here, doesn't have any true meaning to it."

"You almost sound like you know Ogi, Miss Gaen, but you've never actually met her before, right?" I asked.

A question I'd been wanting to ask.

Considering the chain of events until this point—and considering what Ogi had told me, there shouldn't have been any direct contact between the two.

Of course, as someone who knows everything, perhaps Miss Gaen should have been talking about Ogi in this way—but I couldn't help but feel a little disgusted to hear her talk about someone I knew as though she knew her better than I did.

I admit the feeling was closer to jealousy than anything.

"I haven't. Because she's been avoiding me—or for a better way to put it, those kinds of beings don't appear in front of people like me, who live their lives never digressing from their duty."

"…?"

"But while I haven't met her, it's not as if I don't know her—there

are a lot of things I need to explain to you, Koyomin, this included, but why don't we start from the beginning? We don't have much time, and I'm only going to explain this once, so listen carefully."

Having said this much, Miss Gaen pulled out a smallish tablet. It seemed that as usual, she'd be writing on it as she explained this plan or whatever it was.

I recalled what happened in August.

That's when she told me about Shinobu's first thrall at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, right? But this lecture seemed like it would be even more complex, tricky, and grand.

"I'd like to make this discussion quick and head to our site asap. I do know that things rarely go as planned…but we do need to draw a line somewhere that we can make the standard."

"There's one thing I want to make sure of first. Or rather, something I want you to assure me of. Are you sure that Ogi is going to make her move tonight? No matter what kind of trap we set for Ogi, it won't matter unless she does, right?"

"She will. I wouldn't say I'm sure of it so much as it's a fact□tonight is the only night. If she doesn't move here, you could say that she isn't her. Though that would take care of the threat," Miss Gaen replied with confidence.

I didn't understand her grounds for saying so, which is to say that she hadn't told me anything essential at all, but her attitude was so commanding that I still didn't feel like pushing any further□it made me think that Miss Gaen's most outstanding feature wasn't the amount of knowledge or information she possessed, but rather this self-confidence.

A self-assuredness that overpowered any possibility of argument.

It sat in contrast with her relaxed demeanor.

…While I did try asking her, I already felt certain of it myself□I had this unshakable confidence that Ogi would move today, March fourteenth.

After all.

That's what she said she'd do.

Just now—before I came here, in front of the gate to the Araragi residence.

—Araragi-senpai.

—Could you side with me?

—Please save me.

"…"

"Hm? What's the matter, Koyomin? You look worried—no need to get so worked up, it's not like I'm going to talk about anything complicated. In fact, this ought to be an easy long passage for someone who just overcame his college entrance exams. I'm just trying to explain a convoluted situation in a clear way—I don't know about saying that we're checking each other's answers here, but it's like the reveal chapter of a mystery novel."

The reveal chapter of a mystery novel.

If anything—that was Ogi's role.

Or perhaps Tsubasa Hanekawa's, but she wasn't here—she didn't make it here in time for the big reveal.

She was already quite the master detective, having pinned down Mèmè Oshino's whereabouts—and perhaps the normal thing to do here would be to inform Miss Gaen of her junior's possible discovery, but I hesitated to do so for some reason.

Because I might give her false hope—or so my excuse went, but actually, I concealed the fact because I was cautious of her.

Though it's not like—I was trying to take Ogi's side or anything.

"All right," Miss Gaen said, then smiled.

The way a master detective would.

“Then why don’t we begin with the relationship between this park and Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. With the genesis of our current tragedy. The tragedy that befell Shirohebi Shrine, Kita-Shirahebi Shrine’s predecessor, four hundred years ago□”

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“That said, Koyomin, you might know a little bit about this since you must have gotten a lecture from the very green Tadatsuru while in the depths of hell—or somewhere like it. Someone with good enough intuition should be able to arrive at the right answer after hearing nothing more than this park’s official name.

“But we can’t allow a conclusion made from a haphazard guess to turn into a mistake at a moment as critical as this one—so I’ll be explaining this from the top. What I say here may seem to be unrelated to Ogi Oshino at times, but I want you to listen carefully since this is where everything began.

“Four hundred years ago.

“Tell me, what happened then?

“You can’t be so dull that you’d even get this question wrong, Koyomin—yes, the date that the legendary vampire Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade arrived in Japan. Though it’d be a major event now, surely creating a major commotion at the airport, there were no airports in Japan then, I’m sad to report.

“But I don’t say that as some sort of jokey metaphor—rather than use the ocean routes in that grand seafaring age, she arrived from afar by sky.

“You’ve already heard the circumstances from her own mouth—and we could have her explain it again since she’s here with us, but I’m going to ask that you allow me to do the honors, given all the hard work I’ve put in. I’m sure it’s not something that Shinobu—or rather, Miss Shinobu is very eager to do, either.

“To summarize… Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, about two hundred years old at the time, went on a trip around the world

out of boredom. I'm sure it had something to do with the fact that the two-hundred-year-mark or so is when immortal vampires tire most of life.

"The unusual thing about her was that she visited Antarctica as a part of this global trip—but this would also lead her down the path of destruction.

"This happened because nothing existed in Antarctica that could recognize the aberration she was. Aberrations can only exist by being recognized by humans, after all—so she couldn't exist for long on the massive uninhabited island that is Antarctica. Even Heartunderblade, however exceptional a vampire she may be, was no exception.

"So she panicked and escaped from Antarctica.

"She escaped with a super jump instant air dash.

"This is where the uncharacteristically flustered Heartunderblade flew into the air without thinking about her destination—I'm sure that she wouldn't have done anything so thoughtless in regular times, but it was an emergency involving her continued existence, after all. And even if she'd landed in the mouth of a volcano, it wouldn't have been much of a problem at all for someone like her with absolute immortality. Were you to compare it to something a human would do, it'd be like being flustered and walking barefoot to your front doorstep—or the opposite, walking back into your home without taking off your shoes in order to grab something you forgot. Nothing but a question of footing.

"At least, it should have been.

"No, in reality, that's what it was—but this would be more than a small splash for the place where she landed. Quite literally, the splash she created was stunning.

"There, in the country known as Japan.

"Stood a body of water in a provincial town.

"She splashed down in the lake—splashing it everywhere.

“It’s incredible if you think about it in terms of probability. She’d essentially thrown a dart at a spinning globe, and not only did she happen to hit Japan, she landed right on a lake. The expectation would be for the dart to hit the ocean, and even if it did hit land, to hit a continent like the Americas or Eurasia.

“I guess you can just say she has great luck.

“That’s Heartunderblade for you.

“To go further, that lake was no regular lake—what’s incredible is that it was a sacred lake that had garnered the collective faith of the people of the area.

“A kind of Shinto shrine, if you want.

“She’d sent that splashing everywhere, so she’d created more than a little mess… She deserved more than divine punishment, and she would in fact face quite the punishment. That just shows you how well the world works.

“How balanced it stays.

“Heartunderblade jumped from Antarctica and flew halfway around the world like some sort of inter-continental ballistic missile only to land in a sacred lake—destroying it outright.

“Drying it out.

“She of course didn’t suffer a scratch—and it would have healed in the blink of an eye even if she had, but as for the place where she landed, as for the impact zone, this was quite the problem—but, as I said just a moment ago, while the occult view of this mess she made would say she deserved punishment, she had in fact brought blessings to the area as well.

“The water of the lake that flew into the air as a result of her impact turned right into blessed rain that fell on the then drought-stricken area.

“This must have seemed like a miracle to the people there who worshiped the lake—a welcome rain that meant their daily and

nightly prayers to their god had been answered. After all, there at the base of the dried-up lake appeared a beautiful blond woman.

“She appeared, or maybe she seemed born.

“And so, they thought of her as a manifestation of their god□which was hardly surprising.

“If anything, it’d be surprising if they didn’t.

“As a result, the Western aberration that is a vampire□Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, usurped their faith.

“Or you could say she scattered their god and took over its position.

“The shock is even greater when you consider that this means Heartunderblade had already slain a god before she was ever called the Aberration Slayer.

“You might be getting bored by now since this is your second time hearing this story, Koyomin, but is that how you’ve been reading this episode? That Heartunderblade had been treated like a god by accident, and that there was some god there that had been expelled from their seat?

“Come on, Miss Shinobu. There’s no need to hold Koyomin that tight. He’s nothing more than a delicate little human now. You’ll tear his body in two if you squeeze him like that.

“I’m not criticizing you. This is just a story□of long before long, long ago. It’d be too late to try to say anything about it. If I did dare to say something, it’d be that you rejected becoming a god despite being treated like one… That your strong sense of self, something no aberration should have, made the situation worse.

“I do want to point out the fact you made the situation worse.

“And that you invited the Darkness in.

“As a result, Heartunderblade was chased from the land back once more to Antarctica… But we’ll skip over what happened next.

“What we need to talk about right now is about the land whose god was scattered and whose false god was banished—in other words, we need to talk about the land with no god that had been created.

“Though blessed rains fell on the land, and rain continued to fall there thanks to their false god—that too disappeared, and the Darkness drastically reduced its population, and the land was devastated.

“But humans never stop growing in number, and have to live—they needed faith in order to live. No, you can’t blame it on the era. We still need to believe in something to keep on living, don’t we?

“Even I couldn’t live without believing in something.

“So long as we’re alive.

“So long as we live as humans, we have to believe in something or someone—whether that’s god, common sense, devils, or uncommon sense is up to you, of course.

“I wonder what it is in your case.

“Now that you’re familiar with aberrations, vampires, and even hell, what are you going to believe in as you keep living your life—what will you need to believe in to keep on living?

“In any case, as for the people who lost the lake they needed to worship, who’d lost their god—they needed to find a new god.

“No.

“They needed to create a new god.

“And so—they moved their shrine.

“They sealed the lake.

“And that’s what sealed their fate.

“All this happened quite a long time ago, so this, if anything, is something I can’t be certain of without the use of time travel…but

it does seem the people of this land, having lost their faith and their population, decided to join a local indigenous faith to find a way to survive.

“This indigenous faith worshiped mountains, making it of a contrasting type to their former lake-based faith, in a way. If you’ll allow me to irresponsibly drop in from the future to make an irresponsible criticism, they were trying to do something absurd by bringing the ways of their lake to the mountains. What kind of a grafting is that? Though almost all the citizens who had worshiped the lake, which is to say Heartunderblade, had been swallowed up by the Darkness.

“The lake had dried out by then.

“The people who moved the residence of their god must not have known the details—in a sense, that’s when their traditions and their legends came to an end.

“An unsure next generation taking a faith—attempting to recreate a faith that seemed to have worked in the past. That’s not something I can laugh at and call foolish.

“And it’s not as if they were completely off the mark—they had the clamp needed to perform that grafting.

“A clamp.

“An axis—they had a thread that connected the mountain to the lake.

“Or rather, not a thread, but something else long and winding.

“A serpent—a snake.

“To air it all out, just as Kissshot did to the lake, the actual form the god worshiped there took was a water snake—and the form taken by the god of the small indigenous faith in the mountains was a mountain snake.

“A water snake and a mountain snake.

“The snakes were connected.

“Are you familiar with the traditional saying and legend that the snake who lives a thousand years in the mountains and a thousand years in the seas will become a dragon? Well, strangely enough, that’s the exact thing that happened here.

“This nearby indigenous religion was on the wane itself. As befitting of their god, taking in this new fold only meant creating a thin, long faith□it just didn’t work. The graft wasn’t meant to be.

“Like a puzzle piece that’s been forced into a space just because the color looks right. While it may work at first glance, you can’t deny that there’s something warped about it.

“This twisted, unbalanced nature created a kind of air pocket. One that gathered what we’d call bad things. But while these side effects and reactions occurred, the faith did manage to squirm its way through the next four hundred years or so□while I’ve exaggerated and hyperbolized this story to make it sound as dramatic as possible, these kinds of minor errors do happen all the time.

“They’re human acts, after all.

“Of course there will be mistakes.

“You can’t disapprove of every single instance□if the mistake is not a lie, not a falsehood, then you ought to overlook it.

“To be more specific, while the Darkness did not forgive Heartunderblade for feigning to be a god, the connection of the lake to the mountain seems to have been beyond the scope of its duties.

“So.

“I could talk about the details of this forever. It’s like an inexhaustible lake, but let’s stop with the tales of old times here.

“What I’m trying to say, Koyomin, is that the remains of the lake that disappeared without a trace as a result of Shinobu’s super jump instant air dash are located here, Shirohebi Park□and that the mountain shrine where they relocated the faith was Kita-Shirahebi

Shrine.”

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Her wrap-up was so sudden that I thought for a moment I'd lost track of her story—but indeed, I had somewhat of a clue about this, having heard about it from Tadatsuru.

A snake's immortality.

It seemed only right for another immortal being, a vampire, to take over that faith—I even recalled hearing the legend of Hydra, the sea snake, regenerating itself again and again no matter how many times the heroic Heracles sliced through it.

It all checked out.

But.

It was also true that I had no idea how much Shinobu getting treated like a god, contrary to her wishes, had to do with Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—or rather, I had seen the two as separate, standalone stories until I heard what Tadatsuru had to say.

Because that meant Shinobu had already visited this town before, four hundred years ago—I'd never heard about that.

Had I not?

Really?

Hadn't I already heard that Shinobu's first thrall—Seishiro Shishirui—called this place home back in August?

If this was his home, that meant Shinobu had visited this area as well when she came to Japan four hundred years ago.

Yet she herself had never said anything like that, as far as I knew—I turned to face Shinobu, who held me in her arms, and this

voluptuous woman looked at me with an expression now devoid of any childish innocence and□

“??”

Tilted her head to the side.

…Don’t go tilting your head.

It just made her look stupid, like she still hadn’t gotten rid of all her childishness.

She now appeared to be an adult, and she should have grown on the inside as well, but it seemed that your basic personality isn’t that easy to change.

The child is mother of the woman, I suppose.

It might be especially true of her. She was capable of doing something as unbelievable as erasing her own memories (and still leaving them restorable), so it was possible for her not to remember any bad memories that she wished she could forget.

“By the way,” Miss Gaen said, as if to add something extra. “The meager and dwindling Shirohebi Shrine-turned-Kita-Shirahebi Shrine managed to continue until it died out about fifteen years ago□we already talked about this before, right? That he, Miss Shinobu’s first thrall…that his ashes managed to return home, eating up all the bad things that had gathered on the shrine’s premises, god and all□that is when its replacement snake god died. Absorbed and acting to help his return. This too was a factor in what happened next, though.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but it’s not that easy to swallow,” I gave Miss Gaen my honest thoughts.

Actually, I wasn’t confident that I knew what she was talking about□maybe I still didn’t know anything.

It’s not like I had any doubts.

If anything, it all seemed to line up.

It was just that the feeling of it all lining up was a restless, nauseous one—I felt repulsed, as though I was being made to dance in the palm of someone's hand.

Ononoki had said the same thing to me, but even if I was in the palm of someone's hand, whose palm was it? Miss Gaen's? Or Ogi's? Or someone else entirely?

"To guess at how you're feeling, you're looking at it the wrong way around. The way you see it, Heartunderblade having visited Japan and having come to the town you live in seems like too much of a coincidence to be true—but a neutral party like me sees this situation coming about as a plain old necessity because Heartunderblade had visited this place. Of course, we can't even be certain about that, either."

"…"

Had I heard that before as well?

Shinobu came to this town because she'd been summoned by the ashes of Seishiro Shishirui—which made it inevitable, and my meeting Shinobu here rather than someplace else was likewise inevitable.

The look of any town was bound to see a total change after four hundred years, so even if Shinobu wasn't so incurious, it'd be too much to expect her to notice this was the same place she once visited—there was no trace of the lake, after all.

"And it's because of this that once we took care of him, her thrall, I wanted to install Miss Shinobu as the new god of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine," Miss Gaen said, taking out the amulet she'd stuck into her pocket moments ago. "She'd been the one to replace the previously worshiped immortal water snake in the first place—so even in the sense of taking responsibility for that, she seemed to be the right woman for the job, or at least very suitable for it. In any case, the commotion in this town is never going to end until we fill in that air pocket. Mèmè just decided to put a lid on the garbage instead of taking it out, but as an expert who values prevention over investigation, I wanted to conduct some work on a more

fundamental level. I wanted to contribute a pillar to the reconstruction of the fallen shrine—by placing in it a pillar of faith."

Though I was turned down, Miss Gaen said teasingly.

She acted like she was just teasing me, but it was still no laughing matter… I'd done an immeasurable amount of damage by refusing to allow her to turn Shinobu into a god.

"If you'd gone through and laid it all out like this from the start…" I began to say, but even if she'd laid it all out, I doubt I'd have returned the favor by giving her Shinobu.

And not because Shinobu—wasn't cut out to be a god.

In fact, she had lived as a god in the past, though for only a short period of time, and as a false one. Still, you could say she had what it took.

I just didn't want to make Shinobu a god, that's all.

Restoring peace to the town would mean nothing if it meant having to make Shinobu into a god against her will—my selfish logic went.

And that selfish logic still applied.

Miss Gaen could lay it all out, but I would just pick up and go home—even after hearing her words now, I didn't want to make Shinobu swallow her amulet.

"Right, Koyomin?"

"But in that case, what are you going to do? Or…why bring this all up now? If you know that telling me won't do any good—"

"To put it plainly, because it'll do some good now—Koyomin. Why don't we take a quick break here and just state our opinions out loud?"

"Our opinions? State them?"

"You could say our goals, if you want. Or our sense of them."

“…”

I recalled what Hitagi said the day before.

That there’s nothing scarier in the world than someone whose goals you don’t know.

That described Izuko Gaen to a tee—but was she saying she’d come out and state those goals of hers?

I couldn’t have asked for more—so much so that I felt wary. We weren’t in opposition or anything, so why did our conversation have to take place on such pins and needles?

As far as I knew, Miss Gaen wasn’t my enemy.

When I heard the explanation she gave next, though, I started to understand.

This was that explanation:

“I think that’s where the two of us don’t meet eye to eye—and it’s not as if Miss Shinobu and Mayoi Hachikuji are on the same page, either. We’re talking like this, face to face, but we aren’t here to come to an agreement. I included you in this plan expecting one of those miracles that you cause…but I can’t deny that you might bring about further disasters in the process. After all, when I left the question of what to do with Miss Shinobu, just li’l Shinobu at the time, in your hands, it seems like we ended up with an unrelated middle school girl getting turned into a god.”

“…I can’t argue with that.”

In other words, it seemed Miss Gaen was the one who really wanted to know the goals, or the true intentions of an opaque character.

No, she knew everything, and that had to include something as simple as my true intentions—so she must have wanted to get me to say it.

What she must have wanted to say—is that I needed to live up to my words.

“Then I’ll say it… My goal is to…”

But as I tried to put my thoughts into words, I had to confront my own goals. What would have to happen to create an outcome I’d be happy with?

“For now… It has to do with Hachikuji and Shinobu’s situations. Hachikuji, in particular. She might even get swallowed up by the Darkness if we don’t do something I wanted to ask you. Is it possible for someone to pass on to the afterlife twice?”

“It’s not impossible, but she’d probably just end up in hell again, the way she did the first time. She may even have a charge of desertion added on top Avīci might be taking it a little far, but I can’t guarantee that she’d get off with just another trip to children’s limbo.”

What would satisfy you as far as that goes, asked Miss Gaen.

I of course couldn’t abide Hachikuji getting sent down to hell again it was beyond the pale, something I couldn’t disagree with more. What then? Did I need to consider getting engulfed by the Darkness as a better outcome than going to hell? There didn’t seem to be a path to satisfaction as far as this matter went…

“Well, as I told you already, I do have a plan in mind for Mayoi so why don’t you tell me your concerns about Miss Shinobu next? What exactly do you mean when you say you want to do something about her situation?”

“Well… You know, you see the way she is now,” I said, pointing backwards at Shinobu.

The complete form of Shinobu Oshino. The way she is the monster she is.

While I called her Shinobu Oshino, she was in fact now the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade herself.

Which meant losing her current certification as a harmless being forcing her to once more face experts in the field of vampire

slaying as she walked through a whirlwind of blood.

That was not at all something desirable for this woman who'd grown suicidal after tiring of such a life…or so I'd decided for her on my own.

I didn't know how Shinobu felt about it, though.

Maybe she saw it as an improvement over living sealed inside my shadow as a little girl in fact, it'd only be normal if she did.

She did seem to be in a good mood since returning to form.

At the same time, there was something perilous about it after all, she did have a terrifying amount of influence in her full form. She could destroy the world in ten days.

Miss Gaen, at least, wouldn't overlook it.

And the bigger problem than Miss Gaen would be Yozuru Kagenui, the master of Yotsugi Ononoki, that corpse doll she now held in her arms. There'd be nothing happy about the news to a woman who detested immortal aberrations but wait.

She'd gone missing…

"I'm also worried about not knowing where Oshino and Miss Kagenui are," I said.

Though Hanekawa already seemed to have an idea as far as Oshino, I couldn't say the same about Miss Kagenui… The girl who only knew what she knew probably wouldn't be able to find a woman she'd never met.

"Would you not be able to start life as a college student with a fresh slate unless you cleared up those questions as well? Assuming you do get accepted. Only focused on what's right in front of you, just as always," Miss Gaen added with a laugh. "But I'm jealous. Jealous more than anything. I feel like I'm living my life pretty free, but I can't escape my position so I can't say anything that free. My goal is to bring peace to this town. As I've said again and again, I want to bring stability to this spiritually disturbed town. Nothing more."

“…”

Her goal was so grand that it could seem devoid of any human emotion—but small minds cannot wrap themselves around the truly great—and Miss Gaen’s words seemed to be proof of that.

Then again, after speaking with her for this long, even I started to get at least a glimpse of how she really felt—bringing stability to an entire town must have been on the small side as far as goals went for her.

“I mean, sure. I want the town I live in to be at peace, too, but…I’m not someone grand enough to set something that out as a goal for myself. Thinking about my friends and family is the most I can do.”

“And I’m saying that’s what poses a danger to me—but we can come to an agreement there. This time, at least.”

“What do you mean?”

“You say you’re worried about your friends and family, but you only ever care about others. We can come to an agreement here because you don’t pay any mind to yourself,” she said—she seemed relieved, but I didn’t know what that relief meant.

Myself? I didn’t have to worry about my body, now that I’d settled the issue of it growing vampiric…

“I know this might seem stubborn, but to stubbornly make sure—you don’t oppose me subduing this town in general, do you? In fact, you’d help me out if the conditions are right, won’t you?”

“Yeah, of course I would—”

“What about you, Miss Shinobu?” Though I was still mid-reply, Miss Gaen shifted her attention and spoke to the beautiful blond holding me in her arms, Shinobu Oshino. “What are your goals? What are you thinking right now, Miss Shinobu? What do you want to do?”

“I merely obey my master. If he tells me to cooperate with thee, then I shall—and if he tells me to oppose thee, then I shall,” Shinobu answered without delay. She was certain. She didn’t waver, the way

I did□but something about her…

“Something about you makes it seem like you’re more loyal to Koyomin now that you’re an adult, Miss Shinobu. Doesn’t it? I can’t say I expected this. The most likely outcome to me was that you’d slaughter him now that your link is severed, along with your master-servant relationship.”

That was the most likely one?

I’m sure that meant Miss Gaen had put together some kind of way to prevent that from happening, but it was scary to hear her put it out there.

“Kakak. ’Tis not as though the relationship of master and servant exists only by way of blood□but anyway, expert. If ye would allow me to speak my own desires. If it were possible,” Shinobu said.

Close to my ears.

“I’d much prefer it if ye could turn me back into a little girl.”

006

It goes without saying that Mayoi Hachikuji and Yotsugi Ononoki had no goals of their own in this meeting—how could they? Hachikuji was an utter bystander, someone I'd dragged into the situation, if you wanted to put it that way, whom I'd brought with me from hell against her will. As far as Ononoki, forget about a doll like her having a sense of purpose, I didn't know if she sensed anything at all.

I suppose that as far as Hachikuji goes, you could say that I wanted to help her escape from her position between a rock and a hard place. It's not like she could go back to hell, but she couldn't stay either. She had nowhere to go.

Though I say this as if her problems had nothing to do with me, most of the responsibility for her situation did rest on my shoulders…

"So, now that we all know where we stand, let me explain what exactly we'll be doing next. The minimum required to fulfill your goals, Koyomin, and my goals, as well as Miss Shinobu's goals and Mayoi's goals all at the same time."

Miss Gaen said this as if she had some kind of fixed process in mind, but I found it hard to believe that any such requirements existed—though the way she said minimum required did make it seem like there may be more requirements out there…

"We have two minimum requirements. One is to install a new god at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—the other is the elimination of Ogi Oshino."

Elimination.

Hearing the word said out loud so clearly made me a little bit

nervous—I tried to be careful about not showing those nerves on my face, but Shinobu may have figured it out via osteophony as she held me in her arms.

Please save me.

Ogi's earlier words may have come across to her.

If we focused on Shinobu in this situation, though, the issue wasn't the second requirement. The first was the most pressing.

"Miss Gaen. If you're trying to say we should make Shinobu the god of the shrine, then—"

"Yes, that was the plan. That's why my original plan was to have you leave once you came back to life—but the situation changed when you brought Mayoi Hachikuji back from hell with you. There's no longer any need to install Miss Shinobu at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, though this did come about half by force—because in a sense, an even more suitable substitute for a god than Miss Shinobu—no, because a successor to a god has appeared."

"A successor to a god?"

"I'm talking about Mayoi."

With that.

Miss Gaen pointed at the pigtailed girl who hadn't been participating much in the conversation—yet despite being pointed at, Hachikuji remained calm.

In other words.

They'd already—come to a deal.

But I was hearing this for the first time. Of course this shocked me—Hachikuji?

Mayoi Hachikuji—at that shrine?

"N-No! Th-That'd be even worse! I mean, Hachikuji is…"

“She’s what?” urged Miss Gaen, but I had no words—I began knowing that we couldn’t do it, that it was impossible, but pressed for a specific reason why we couldn’t, why it was impossible, no answer came forth.

It was so unexpected that I’d reacted without thinking… Well, maybe I couldn’t think of a reason to be against it, but I still couldn’t think of a reason to be for it, either.

Not because I’d become overly conservative, afraid of losing anything—as far as I knew. Not because the experience of losing Hachikuji once had carved itself into me.

I didn’t think Shinobu was too attached to Hachikuji, but in reality, this was a discussion about her potential successor.

It seemed she couldn’t stay uninterested.

“The waif may be qualified,” she inserted herself into the conversation, still concealing her stance on the matter. “We cannot deny that the lost girl has performed a miracle, having returned from hell.”

That was true.

What’s more of a miracle than resurrection? If the requirement to be a god is the performance of miracles, we could say that Hachikuji met it.

But in that case, I met the requirement as well, and so did Ononoki—not that I could ever imagine myself or Ononoki becoming a god, but the same went for Hachikuji…

“No, it’s not the same,” Miss Gaen said. “When it comes to Mayoi Hachikuji as compared to you or Yotsugi, while you did all come back to life, the conditions are different—you came back with a physical body, but she’s a spirit.”

“Are you saying you can’t become a god if you have a physical body?”

“No. As we can see from Nadeko Sengoku. There are such things as

gods incarnate—the difference here is that Mayoi will be swallowed up by the Darkness unless she becomes a god."

Right.

She'd chosen to pass on to the afterlife in the first place because she'd been chased by the Darkness—and while it'd be one thing if she'd come back to life with a body, continuing to remain in our world as a spirit meant she'd inevitably find herself chased.

In other words, Miss Gaen said, there were three choices.

"1: Go back to hell. 2: Be engulfed by the Darkness. 3: Become a god—that's it. Okay, become a god is a little overblown. In reality, she's just changing jobs as an aberration. All aberrations are like gods. This also makes her situation different from deifying you or Yotsugi. Enshrining her at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—would permit Mayoi Hachikuji to continue existing in this world."

She'd receive citizenship. She'd receive residency, in other words.

"So for the most part, it'd be nothing but positive for little Hachikuji… She will of course have to do some work, but if she can manage the air pocket there, that'll be more than enough prevention. I wouldn't think of asking for anything more, I wouldn't demand anything unreasonable."

"That seems to be the case," Hachikuji said curtly.

From what her expression told me, she'd agreed to it on an informal basis and had no plans to change her opinion, either—and it'd be hard for me to complain if she felt fine with it.

In fact, if it worked, the idea did a perfect job of smoothing over my thoughtless deed, namely kidnapping Hachikuji out of hell. I ought to be grateful, and had no right to complain… Even then, I couldn't help but be the voice of prudence when it came to Hachikuji.

Maybe the concept of Hachikuji, the young girl, just didn't match up with the concept of god in my mind—oh, but speaking of not matching.

“B-But isn’t that a shrine that worships snakes? Wouldn’t it cause another distortion in the way of things if it housed Hachikuji, a snail aberration?”

“And that is the miracle so great that I can’t even believe you made it happen by accident, Koyomin□without it, even I may not have thought of installing her as a god. Becoming Kita-Shirahebi Shrine’s deity requires a reason, even if it’s nothing more than a sophistic stretch□just as they brought the lake shrine to the mountains by way of a serpentine connection, or the way Heartunderblade claimed to be its false god by way of a shared immortality. We needed a reason on that level, or perhaps on an even higher one.”

“R-Right? So□”

“Snails,” Miss Gaen said. “They’re backwards compatible with snakes.”

“What?”

“Er, that wording might be too self-serving□but Koyomin, you must have heard of sansukumi before, right? It’s hardly expert knowledge.”

“Sansukumi?”

The original form of rock-paper-scissors?

The very basics of it, sure.

“With the snake, the frog□and the slug, right?”

The snake eats the frog, the frog eats the slug, and the slug feeds off the snake. It could also be used to describe a trilemma□a slug?

That sounded somehow familiar.

“Oh, right. Namekuji tofu□the Slug Tofu. The fake aberration Kaiki used on Sengoku…”

“That’s right. An aberration that’s effective against snakes□a slug.”

Slugs and snails are closely related species, Miss Gaen added.

“Oh.”

Right, what a blind spot—I should have realized what she was trying to say from the moment she brought up sansukumi. Snails have shells, while slugs don’t—slugs are pretty much snails who’ve devolved their shells away.

In that case, far from having nothing to do with snakes.

Snails—could suppress snakes.

Instead of going wild like Sengoku, instead of being swallowed up by a snake, she could be the one to engulf the snake.

“I see. Call me Mayoi Namekuji,” Hachikuji nodded along. The pun was almost too good to be true.

“Now, of course,” Miss Gaen said, “it’d be best if a snake took over for a snake…but in a sense, this is even more ideal. In other words—we’re spiraling around the solution the opposite way.”

“…”

When she put it like that, even meeting Hachikuji at this park—the former site of Shirohebi Shrine, predecessor to Kita-Shirahebi—seemed fated. Though this too had to be a stretch.

Still, wasn’t it a multitude of acrobatic stretches, one contortionist experience after the other, that brought us to where we were, by some sort of miracle?

“Speaking as an expert, if I had to point out a flaw, the ji in Hachikuji’s name indicates a Buddhist temple, while she’d be residing in a Shinto shrine…but let’s overlook that in the spirit of Shinto-Buddhist syncretism. It’s not like we could change her name… Her family name was once Tsunade, rope hand, wasn’t it.”

Despite her laidback demeanor, Miss Gaen was surprisingly detail-oriented when it came to work—she must’ve turned over and thought through every side of any problem an amateur like me

could come up with.

Also, she'd said residing—it would be Hachikuji's residence. The word choice was no doubt another attempt to persuade me, but how could I not be taken in?

Whether a shrine or a temple.

For Mayoi Hachikuji, lost on the streets for eleven years—treated to the mysterious misfortune of having to stack up stones by the side of a river—it was such a massive and clear saving grace to have a place she could call home, live in, return to.

Miss Gaen had framed it as a multiple-choice question with three answers, but there was no other choice.

Nor did we have time to search for a fourth. I could go on and on for as long as I wanted and nothing productive would come out of it—but.

"Are you really okay about this, Hachikuji?"

I had to make sure.

I'd been speaking with Miss Gaen this whole time and not asking Hachikuji herself—but I couldn't not ask.

"Yes, I am. A god—I feel like I'm walking on clouds."

In the lap and arms of a beautiful blond, my position may not have seemed the most serious in the world, but I'd tried to give my question some sincere weight; yet Hachikuji's response was light and offhanded.

Walking on clouds…

"I'm godly. A slip of the tongue."

"Stop it, you're making this sound like a joke. Don't take something as serious as this on as a joke."

"A posthumous two-rank promotion is nothing compared to this."

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure you don’t get it…”

Her response was justifying my concern.

True, it’s not like I got what was going on, but I knew of two examples where being trapped in that manner led to cruel situations.

Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

Nadeko Sengoku.

And frankly, I didn’t want to add Mayoi Hachikuji to the list, no matter how much they told me there was no other solution.

“Oh, but I do,” she still said, confident to the point of conceit.

“Are you sure? You understand the responsibility and meaning, the weight and role of becoming a god?”

“Well, no, those things, not at all.”

“No?!”

“However,” she perked up.

It was such a trademark Hachikuji smile.

“What I do understand is that it means I’ll get to play with you.”

007

Please don't think that my qualms vanished the moment I heard I'd be playing with Hachikuji. I'll admit, though, that I was stunned silent by her moving words.

Miss Gaen was not one to waste such opportunities.

"Anyway, we've cleared one of the hurdles. Mayoi Hachikuji just needs to swallow this amulet and Kita-Shirahebi Shrine's new god will be born," she proceeded to wrap up the discussion about the first requirement—um, wasn't she being too facile about an important point? "Ah, well, in Mayoi's case, maybe I should say chew up and digest rather than swallow."

"My issue isn't with your precise wording…" I didn't want us to settle on a conclusion when the situation remained so hazy. At the same time, I knew that nothing could fully satisfy me here.

"If you want to let the Darkness swallow her up, I'll leave that decision to you, Koyomin—it's just a question of means to me. This is the one time where you can't take her place, though."

"Indeed…and while I will but do as ye conclude, surely 'twould weigh on thy conscience to have brought thy favorite child back from hell only to have her swallowed up by the Darkness," Shinobu chimed in, wrapping her legs around me in addition to her arms. It was as if she'd decided to sit cross-legged around my body, which was wanting in manners for an adult—at least usually, but the pose looked handsome and cool when Shinobu did it, unfairly enough.

I bet I never looked that stylish holding her in my arms.

Anyway, being rebuked by her made it only harder for me to argue—in fact, I'd lost my grounds for objecting now. Shinobu and Sengoku had failed as gods for a reason, while the new unit had no

shortcomings according to the lecture of an expert, Miss Gaen.

“Yes, kind monster sir. Get your damn act together. You think whining and complaining about what other people want to do makes you so cool? Keep your mouth shut if you don’t have an alternative. Is dragging down the doers all you can do?”

“Hold on, Ononoki. I can come up with plenty of arguments when it comes to you.”

Such a nasty tone. She reminded me of an angry Tsukihi.

Mellowing a bit, she asked me, “Didn’t we go over this more than enough in August?” With Miss Gaen’s arms around her (looking like a ventriloquist dummy, given that she was a doll), Ononoki continued, “She could get swallowed up by the Darkness while we’re squiggling and squabbling.”

“Oh…by the way.”

It wasn’t so much Ononoki badmouthing me, but Miss Gaen, Shinobu, and her speaking in succession that made me come up with a rebuttal. Or rather, I’d been thinking about it for a while but hadn’t had a good time to bring it up. I’d kept my earlier run-in with Ogi in front of my home secret, and kept quiet about it as a result, but maybe I should’ve informed everyone about it sooner.

If only to ascertain its veracity.

Though it was late in the game□no, maybe this was actually the best possible timing since Miss Gaen was trying to pivot to the second requirement, namely Ogi Oshino…

“Miss Gaen.”

“What is it, Koyomin?”

“It’s, um…about the Darkness. We might be terribly mistaken about something,” I said, my voice subdued. “It could be that□Ogi Oshino isn’t the Darkness.”

“I know.”

An instant reply.

My subdued tone for naught.

I'd even used italics like a fool.

Instead of striking out swinging, I was getting called out on a bunted foul—did cricket have a similar rule?

"Get out of here."

This unpretentious expression of disbelief came from Ononoki. Since she and Miss Gaen didn't act as one, I suppose their views didn't always match up.

"Seriously? Damn. I'd been so convinced I foreshadowed all kinds of stuff assuming that was the case."

"…"

Who asked you to? Don't be foreshadowing like it's your mission, okay? What an annoying character trait, what an annoying character.

As for Shinobu, she stayed silent.

She seemed to belong to the camp who'd known… Maybe she wasn't saying anything out of caution to avoid revealing her position inadvertently.

Hachikuji, never knowing much about Ogi, who transferred into Naoetsu High after she'd passed on—sat there blankly like she didn't care either way.

"Why did you think Ogi Oshino is the Darkness in the first place?" Miss Gaen asked me.

"Well, I mean…"

"Oh, sorry, don't get me wrong, Koyomin. I wasn't trying to fault or laugh at you with that. If anything, it was only natural to think so," Miss Gaen said, quite naturally herself—as though this turn in our

conversation had also been part of her calculations. But how could she predict this, too, without listening in on my earlier conversation with Ogi?

“Why was it natural…to think so?”

“I’ll explain what I mean later,” replied Miss Gaen, prioritizing her arrangements.

“What I need to know beforehand is□at what point you arrived at the notion. Depending on your answer, we might want to modify our measures… I have a pretty good idea, though.”

“There was no specific point. Hearing and seeing how she spoke and acted, it just came to me… She was looking for Hachikuji and all. Then there’s Sengoku, and Tadatsuru…”

And the very start of it, Ogi Oshino’s initial case.

The chain of events surrounding Sodachi Oikura after I met the transfer student for the first time was□almost blatant, if you will.

No, but it wasn’t through accumulating info that way, it was intuitive□just take her tar-black vibes.

The Darkness itself, wouldn’t you say?

A deep darkness insisting on the rules.

An inky darkness revering balance.

“But if we’re saying it was only natural for me to think so□was she actively trying to make me? To mislead me?”

It seemed possible. Ogi would do that. As nothing more than a prank, too.

Not that she’d ask Tadatsuru to hunt us down as a prank□

“Nope, that’s not it.” Miss Gaen shook her head at my assessment, however. Once again. “Well, actually, it might’ve been her own understanding at first□and she does continue to charge herself with

that duty. Ogi Oshino may not be the Darkness itself, but is doing its work."

Bearing the same role, she rephrased.

"The same role as the Darkness…"

The "natural phenomenon" that once assaulted Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, worshiped as a false god—and Mayoi Hachikuji, who stayed in this world despite losing her reason to exist.

The Darkness.

A.k.a. a black hole, dark matter—a phenomenon, or concept, that clamped down on aberrations that strayed from their path.

When it visited Hachikuji in August, I didn't have the time to think about it in depth, panic being my foremost reaction—but I did my best later and came to the conclusion that it was by no means a natural enemy, or the punitive body, of aberrations.

The rules of our world.

Like gravity or action-and-reaction, natural selection or survival of the fittest, math formulas or any of those kinds of laws—to be obeyed, and not to be defied, but without some sort of thing to the floating black thing.

Yes.

That's what I believed—until I met Ogi Oshino.

Who did exist.

And yet, mistaken as always, jumping to conclusions and spinning in place, I ended up as far off the mark as possible.

"Oh, don't be so down on yourself—what did I just tell you? Ogi Oshino took on the Darkness' role, so you weren't terribly off the mark thinking she was it. But to get everything straight just in case," Miss Gaen said, turning to Hachikuji, "the Darkness that

might revisit this town if we left you in your current state, that we were fretting about earlier, is the genuine Darkness□which attacked Heartunderblade, and you in August. The authentic, veritable Darkness. Meanwhile, even if we enshrined you at Kita-Shirahebi and made you its god, you could still come under attack□from Ogi Oshino, in the role of the Darkness.”

Miss Gaen turned from Hachikuji to me again, but stare at me though she might, this turn in the conversation was so sudden I couldn’t react right away. The best I could do was echo her.

“We could enshrine her□and she’d attack?”

Huh?

Only after tracing the words did it sink in□and I had to wonder what the hell was going on. We’d been talking about enshrining and deifying her to stave off the Darkness, even though it hadn’t been Miss Gaen’s goal, but what was the point if Hachikuji was still going to be attacked?

What was it all for, then?

We wouldn’t be able to play together□

“Well, that’s why I said two minimum requirements□enshrining Mayoi as a god isn’t enough on its own. That’s half of it, but there’s the other half: we aren’t getting anywhere until we eliminate Ogi Oshino.”

“You keep on using that word, eliminate…” I said, unable to take it anymore.

Maybe she was just using a customary term without meaning anything by it, but I had trouble putting up with such talk about my junior, a girl at that, even if she was opposed to us, whether or not she was the Darkness.

□Could you side with me?

□Please save me.

It wasn't that her plea swayed me. It was a matter of word choice.

"Could you please not?" I requested. "You're making it sound like Ogi's just some aberration."

"Well, but she is," came another immediate reply, "an ordinary monster."

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I realized that some time had passed.

I wasn't sure if this passage was also a part of Miss Gaen's plan. Although the situation steadily moved toward a resolution, and the truth was being revealed, I couldn't help but feel the opposite—that the situation was only deteriorating, the truth receding further into the depths.

A monster.

An ordinary—monster.

If we're going to nitpick, I don't think anything counts as ordinary once it's monstrous, but maybe the adjective was warranted amidst a grand assembly of irregularities: the complete form of legendary vampire Shinobu Oshino, man-made aberration Yotsugi Ononoki, and soon-to-be god Mayoi Hachikuji.

"Ogi's—an aberration?"

Well.

Once I heard the words out loud, maybe that wasn't so unnatural? Not that I had the right to say anything, having half-assumed that her true form was the Darkness…but her too-elusive appearances and disappearances did have a supernatural quality to them.

Since I'd already suspected that she was the Darkness, wondering if she was an aberration was hardly improper.

Monster… It felt like our tale was returning to its origins, after all this time.

Sure, you shouldn't forget your roots, but a monster, or an aberration, transferring into Naoetsu High? Going to school, taking

classes, and studying?

“Hold on, Koyomin. It’s not as if you’ve seen her going to school, taking classes, or studying—it’s just that most of your contact with her is centered around school.”

“…”

Fine, fine.

But wait, this called for a fundamental change in how I thought about the situation, and I needed to regain my composure. If I could, I’d go home, sleep on it, and come back—but knew that wasn’t happening.

I tried to remember.

All of my exchanges with Ogi—but my memories didn’t lead anywhere, I found no route to follow.

The harder I tried to recall them, the hazier they grew.

Not just now, either—this always happened with her. Speaking with Ogi muddled my memories. Remembering things I didn’t want to remember, forgetting things I ought to be thinking about, finding memories that never existed planted in my mind.

Almost as if—some kind of supernatural force was involved, but…

“Even if Ogi is an aberration, isn’t her identity too unclear? It’s like we should just call her the Darkness and be done with it. What basis do you have for calling her a monster?”

“Well, what basis do you have for calling her Ogi?”

“?”

Did I sound too familiar calling her by her first name? Was I the one who needed to reconsider how I spoke about her, and to stop being so chummy—when it was clear that she was our opponent? That said, it’s not like you can suddenly start calling someone by another name.

□Hitagi.

Ack. I remembered the night before, and felt more bashful than amused.

“What are you blushing for? Gross.”

Ononoki never let a blunder like that get away from her. A nasty personality, through and through.

Come to think of it, calling the shikigami by her first name was odd, too…but that didn’t seem to be Miss Gaen’s point.

“You’re calling her Ogi because she introduced herself as Ogi Oshino, and you just accepted it,” the expert continued□loud and clear.

“…She gave me a fake name?”

“Nah, a false name, pseudonym□it wouldn’t even qualify as those. It’s as slapdash as a name can get, like something invented on the spot. What you should’ve done when she gave that name, Koyomin, was laugh. Me, I’d have burst out in hysterics.”

“…”

So said Miss Gaen, but I had no clue what was so funny about the name. If she thought it was eccentric, what about Mèmè Oshino, who shared her surname? Not to mention Shinobu Oshino, whose given name deliberately repeated the first character of that surname? It was almost witty…

“Your instincts are uncharacteristically dull today, Mister Araragi,” Hachikuji stepped in to take over the explaining duties. Who knew she saw me as a character with sharp instincts, but right, maybe I ought to have noticed a little sooner.

After all, she and I had been at each other’s throats about names.

Still, calling me out when most of her info on Ogi came from our current discussion showed what a seasoned veteran Hachikuji was on the topic.

“My sense is that Miss Kanbaru introduced this Miss Ogi Oshino individual to you, correct? As a fan of the former star of the basketball team?”

“Yeah…that’s how it happened.”

“A fan. Like an ogi, a folding fan.”

I almost passed out at how trivial it was.

Yes, nothing as grand as an alias—and more of a blithe user name, like AAAA or CCCC or 1234, an offhanded, indifferent handle that I should have identified as a lie the moment I heard it.

The audacity of it, I guess, was nothing less than grand.

“But then what about her last name, Oshino… Oh, wait, the part about being his niece is a lie, too?”

“The situation is a little more complicated with the surname. Or maybe I should say roundabout… But yeah, she isn’t his niece. If you ask me, having been his senior, he has no niece—I don’t think. Mèmè’s a living, breathing human being, so I’m sure he has relatives in the biological sense, but as far as I know, that junior of mine is all alone in this world,” Miss Gaen declared.

“In that case, was she trying to gain our trust by claiming to be his niece? But why? What did she want so much that she’d come to us falsifying everything down to her background and the stuff she’s made of?”

Aberrations.

There’s a reason for every one.

Not intransigent like the Darkness.

So then, what necessity caused the aberration known as Ogi Oshino to appear at Naoetsu High—to throw my life into this much disarray?

“If Ogi Oshino isn’t Ogi Oshino, what is that girl? What’s—her true

identity?”

I was being thoroughly disgraceful here, the type who knew only how to demand explanations, but I wasn’t going to be told that she was an aberration and leave it at that.

Please, convince me.

“Right now, her identity is the unidentifiable. Which is why the way to eliminate her is clear… The original plan was for the enchanted blade Kokorowatari to do the job, though it wouldn’t have been the appropriate method—more like expedient or rule-breaking. For an expert in my field, a greatsword that can slice up any aberration is a pretty big rules violation to begin with. What can you say, that’s Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade’s first thrall for you… How ironic that he was also the one to lead us to this twisted conclusion.”

“Your plan was to kill Ogi with the Aberration Slayer?”

“Come on, don’t glare at me like that—whose side are you on, anyway?”

It seemed to be a light-hearted quip, and not a knowing one, but her words made my heart leap. I felt like she’d pierced my strained nerves with needles.

Be that as it may, I couldn’t reply without reservation that I was on Miss Gaen’s side—even apart from that exchange with Ogi the night before.

“Cutting down an aberration with the Aberration Slayer. There shouldn’t be anything contradictory about that—it’s what an expert should do,” Miss Gaen said.

“Is that why you made Kokorowatari?”

When she wielded the sword to slice me into pieces at the shrine, I wondered why it was in her possession, but by now the method of its creation was clear to me. The first thrall Seishiro Shishirui’s armor—it had gone missing in August, and she’d reforged it.

I couldn't pinpoint the source of this reasoning, but I was certain. Had she already been planning to use it on Ogi?

That'd be ridiculous. Aberration or transfer student, Ogi appeared before us in October, and Miss Gaen shouldn't have had any reason to create the blade back in August.

At that point, Ogi hadn't done anything to merit elimination…

"Don't tell me that you know everything and made plans in your calendar in August to have this meeting today, on March fourteenth?"

"Of course not. School schedules don't matter to someone my age."

Her answer didn't line up with my question. I wasn't asking if she went by the calendar or academic year.

"Knowing everything," she continued, "is different from being able to predict things. As sad as it makes me to let a friend down, I'm not so transcendent that I could foresee every future twist and turn during the events in August. A common misconception, but I'm just omniscient, not omnipotent."

"But in that case□"

"I wasn't thinking of killing Ogi Oshino, but I'd anticipated her appearance. I thought it possible□which is why I gathered the First's armor. Just to prepare for the worst, of course."

"Hmph, so sayeth the looter of a fire scene. Little wonder I was left feeling hungry," Shinobu groused.

Every time she suddenly began speaking right next to my ear, I was jolted□and didn't know what to do about the warmth of her breaths.

"Oh, come on, Miss Shinobu, haven't I returned it to you?"

Judging by this response, the sword the legendary vampire had been using to play cricket earlier wasn't her own version, but rather the replica created by Miss Gaen.

Shinobu had swallowed it as always, prior to putting her arms around me, but this meant two enchanted blades were inside her—or maybe three, including the Yumewatari she must've received as part of the set?

"Because," Miss Gaen said, "I don't need it now. If I can get Koyomin's assistance, I don't have to resort to extreme measures—as an expert in eliminating yokai, I can rid us of Ogi Oshino through honest means and the standard method."

"What did you mean by anticipating her appearance?"

That intrigued me more than the precise nature of her honest means and standard method—if she'd anticipated Ogi's appearance, was that really any different from planning on killing her all along?

"Ah, that was just experience speaking—Ogi Oshino is a kind of aberration I've seen before… Maybe I wouldn't go that far, but something similar."

So that's what she meant. She had a wealth of experience as the big boss of the experts in her field, and what would be a bolt from the blue for me was just another notch in her belt.

Or so I thought, but no.

"I encountered it back when I was in elementary school—so this case kind of takes me back, if you don't mind."

"In elementary school?" I couldn't picture her as a Lolita, but then, she couldn't always have been a big boss. Or the lady who knows everything.

"Yeah. To be specific, I wasn't the one to experience it, my older sister did—Toé Gaen. The mother of Suruga Kanbaru, whom you know so well."

As her little sister I had a front-row seat to her experience, and that might've been the origin of the rest of my life, Miss Gaen recollected with genuine nostalgia in her voice.

"My sister—came across an unidentifiable aberration… By the way,

Koyomin. Just how much do you know about my older sister?"

"Um, no real details. Just that she left Kanbaru the Monkey's Paw, really…"

Kanbaru and I never really sweated the serious stuff and just talked about stupid things. Her mom eloped with the Kanbarus' only son, gave birth to Kanbaru, and later died in a traffic accident—was that how it went?

I'd heard vague facts but couldn't tell you what kind of person she actually was. Maybe her personality had been similar to Kanbaru's—not that I wanted to imagine it…

"'If you can't become medicine, then make yourself into poison. Or else you're nothing but plain water,'" Miss Gaen recited, adapting her voice. "She was the type to say something like that to her little sister. And well, honestly, I had trouble dealing with her."

Trouble dealing with family.

I felt as though I'd come in contact with Miss Gaen's human side for the first time—someone who'd speak such a line was kinda scary even to hear about. Yet just as I silently agreed with her…

"She was like you in a way, Koyomin," Miss Gaen showed just how smart I was for doing so. "Though my sister wasn't a demon, she was like a demon. I'm not saying she's like you because you were a bloodsucking demon, but even as an elementary schooler, I thought she was crazy. I knew all too well that she was a dangerous character. How do I put it? She wasn't a monster, but she was monstrous."

"…"

"Hard on herself, and hard on others. The more unforgiving she was, the better. That's the kind of person she was—well, ask Suruga for details next time you see her, if you get the chance. She was a child when she lost her mother, but she must've felt something of it, as her daughter—but I'm getting off topic. I'm not trying to explain my sister's personality to you here. Just saying that I associate you

with her.”

Hard on myself and hard on others?

Wait, that was my personality?

I’ll admit I was tickled that Hachikuji had the most puzzled expression out of us all, but Miss Gaen spoke no more on the subject. Instead…

“Which is exactly why, Koyomin,” she went on, “exactly why I anticipated that you might someday go down the same path—maybe I should say I feared it. From the time I worked with you in August, in fact. Sooner or later, you might be met with the same kind of aberration—and my fears hit the mark… That’s why I always keep my guard up.”

“Your guard, huh.” My nerves would fray if I lived with my guard up that high all the time—but maybe keeping it so low had made my current predicament inevitable. “Just for reference, what did you do then? You didn’t have Kokorowatari with you.”

“Yeah, well, I took an orthodox approach. And I’d like to resume it now—you’re going to do what my sister did, Koyomin.”

“I am? Not you?”

“You’re the only one who can do it.” Miss Gaen nodded forcefully. “There’d be no point in me doing it. Or Miss Shinobu—this method would be pointless for anyone else, even Mèmè or Yozuru. You’re the only one who can do it, and you’re the one who has to do it.”

You have to do it. You and you alone, Miss Gaen said, emphasizing alone.

“Because people get saved on their own, or whatever?” I asked.

“That was Mèmè’s policy, right? It’s not mine, but…it does resonate in this case. Yes, you could say there’s nothing at all I can do to help you.”

“…”

Face off against Ogi, one-on-one, Miss Gaen seemed to be urging, but how could I react with anything but bewilderment to her springing that on me?

My duel against Seishiro Shishirui.

That, I understood—and I'd spent the last year facing off against all kinds, in lethal combat, again and again. I hate to brag, but the way I saw my situation, running through a hailstorm of bullets and making it out alive was no exaggeration. If I were to start the count with my spring-break death match with an earlier iteration of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, the bewitching beauty with her arms around me, fingers beginning to crawl along my ribs—I'd lose count by the time I reached the end of all the fatal encounters I'd endured.

But it was because of these experiences that I couldn't get my head around what Miss Gaen meant by facing off against Ogi—her words felt hollow, like a funny story whose punch line I couldn't make out.

Duel… Settle things… Lethal… All very impressive, but in this case quite devoid of substance.

"Huh. Would you compare it to being shown a five-minute anime short with a full-length opening and ending, Mister Araragi? Like the actual episode is only a minute long?"

"Please, Miss Hachikuji. Not right now."

A surprisingly lucid metaphor, but that's not what we were talking about.

My unease must have stemmed from the fact that whatever Ogi's identity, she didn't strike me as a fighting freshman. She was plenty mysterious, but cleaving a cute high school girl in half with a greatsword in order to dispatch her just seemed so criminal.

"Like I said," Miss Gaen corrected me, "we aren't relying on the sword. That plan is dead—we don't have to use it thanks to you. Even I'd hesitate to slice through anything in the shape of a high

school girl, or really a human in general."

"…"

But you did. Despite my human shape, you mercilessly shredded me into so many pieces that I was no longer recognizable—at a shrine too, on holy ground, didn't you?

I couldn't tell whether she was trying to be clever or sincere, but no point in litigating the past now. I was curious as to why the old plan was dead thanks to me, but what I really needed to know was our operative plan, which I'd missed out on hearing. Especially if I had to carry it out on my own—there are things I can and cannot do, okay?

In fact, the list of things I could do was the shorter of the two. Even if she reminded me that she was hustling for the sake of Hachikuji and Shinobu, I couldn't agree to anything that rivaled using a greatsword to kill Ogi.

"I'm not asking you to do anything of the sort. In fact, it's as easy as can be. Anyone could, as far as doing it goes—it's just that you have to do it for it to be effective."

"This is starting to sound like a big deal. You're acting like it's nothing serious, but aren't you trying to trick me into doing something pretty tough?"

"What do you mean. We'll just have you do what my older sister did ten-plus years ago."

"Again, you're acting like it's no big deal, but you just told me how larger-than-life she was. Hard on herself, hard on others, like a demon—I can't imagine pulling off whatever this outrageous person did."

"Oh, no, in a way, it'd be easier for you than it was for my sister. After all, you're the kind of boy who'd throw his life away to save a vampire on the brink of death."

"…"

What did that have to do with this? Why bring up the time I helped Shinobu during spring break?

Was she going to tell me to save Ogi, another aberration, as I did back then? That was almost…

□Please save me.

The exact thing she'd begged for.

Miss Gaen would never go for that, though, having little to do with that sort of naïveté. I couldn't let her laidback, sisterly demeanor fool me.

Her policy as an expert was to seek only the optimal solution, to the point of severity.

True, from what I understood, she attended to Nadeko Sengoku's case when she became the god of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, but that was only because Sengoku was deemed unfit.

"You see, at the end of the day, the threat of Ogi Oshino, the unidentified aberration□is that she's unidentified. Nothing else."

Miss Gaen opened her mouth again, to tell me what I needed to do.

"She'll crumble if you reveal that identity."

"Crumble?"

"You could also call it annihilation, in the particle physics sense□but what's important here is that she's a fake who's just pretending and falsifying herself. Believe it or not, she's a big fat liar. And when that lie is laid bare□I think Miss Shinobu and Mayoi know quite well what happens then."

They did.

And so did I.

"The Darkness□"

“The Darkness”

“The Darkness.”

The three of us spoke as one.

“Right. The Darkness consumes any aberration that misrepresents its nature—when she’s misrepresenting herself to be the Darkness itself, all the more so. The punishment will be as harsh as it gets for her rules violation. She’s reaping what she sowed, for all the ways she’s behaved around you for the last six months, Koyomin. This time, she’ll be on the receiving end of all the ferocity she lavished on you.”

Miss Gaen smirked. Her expression was wicked, not befitting an amiable lady like her—but more than any sort of just desserts, it felt to me like the last act of a farce.

Like the end of a fairy tale.

Her identity is revealed.

And that alone would make Ogi Oshino’s existence come to an end—if her core principle was unidentifiability, of course that would be her vulnerability.

“At the end of the day, that’s what aberrations are—which is why I called her an ordinary monster. The first aberration you met, Koyomin, was the vampire noble Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, and from there you experienced countless life-or-death battles and even met Yozuru Kagenui, an onmyoji with a nearly unmatched propensity for violence. That must’ve tainted your impression of aberrations—you see them as dangerous beings who must be fought, but at their most basic, they’re just metamorphoses. Something transformed into what it is not, like foxes and tanuki in folklore. Reveal their true identity and they will vanish, like a bugbear in a closet. It’s as simple as that.”

“…”

“When science sheds light on an aberrational phenomenon, it becomes nothing more than a superstition, right? Same thing. We

experts might look like walking antiques to young'uns these days like you, but really, our job is to investigate urban legends and dissect every little part of them, no matter how boorish or unromantic that may be, in order to nullify them. There are still things out there that science can't explain—isn't what I'm saying here. Our line of business is about reducing the number of things out there that science can't explain. We put food on the table by explaining the inexplicable in a way that anyone can understand. And in that sense, a profession like ours is going to vanish someday."

It's kind of like an octopus eating its own leg, Miss Gaen said self-mockingly—I recalled how Oshino also said early on that it's uncivilized to be solving matters violently all the time.

—What a violent line of thought, Araragi.

—Something good happen to you?

He said that too.

I see. To put it in a way that matched up with Miss Gaen's way of thinking, I wasn't going one-on-one against Ogi—this was a unilateral elimination.

As far as the taste the idea left in my mouth, though… It was about as bad as cleaving a high school girl in two with a greatsword. Yet as bad as the aftertaste might be, it seemed like the best and most optimal plan for resolving our town's situation.

"And is that how your sister got rid of an Ogi-like aberration—not the Darkness, but an imitation of it?"

"Yep, you got it. She was no expert, and she was about as old then as you are now, but she managed to figure a way out of her fix on her own. She really is—a strong person. Was a strong person," Miss Gaen corrected herself and used the past tense. "I guess that means being the strongest person is no match for a car crash. Did that upset you, Mayoi?"

"Well…I have to admit automobiles are convenient. Modern society

wouldn't work without them," deadpanned Mayoi Hachikuji, the young girl who lost her life eleven years ago because she got run over crossing on a green light.

Deadpanned… But come on, be traumatized or something.

"Koyomin. You called it an imitation, just now, of the Darkness—and that's a perfect encapsulation, spur-of-the-moment or not. It's easy to understand, it's perfect. However. You'd be making a huge mistake if you also thought that it's somehow inferior. Being an imitation and not the real thing actually makes it more annoying than the genuine article—as my disgrace of a junior, the scam artist Deishu Kaiki would say, the fake is more real than the real deal, because it wills itself to be real."

"So, while the real Darkness wouldn't show up if we made Hachikuji the god of Kita-Shirahebi, the fake one, the imitation Darkness, might… Is that what you're saying?"

"Yup. The way I see it, an imitation Darkness is more dangerous than the Darkness itself, since it would never allow for such an opportunistic, convenient solution—an answer that leaves everyone happy must be cheating. That'd likely be her stance."

"…"

"One way or another, we need to settle this tonight. The elimination of Ogi Oshino, the second condition for fulfilling both my professional duties and your wishes—when I said the first condition would be nullified otherwise, that's what I meant."

—Please save me.

—Could you side with me?

—Please save me.

I couldn't help recalling those words, whatever her intentions were in speaking them.

Was she being sincere? Or were they the utterances of the unidentifiable, an imitation Darkness—either way, and even if she

had ulterior motives, there seemed to be no way for me to honor her request.

Was I letting Miss Gaen talk me into a corner? Maybe I'd fallen for grownup rhetoric.

Whatever the case, an ending where Hachikuji was swallowed up.

More tragedy befalling those I held dear.

That was something I couldn't ignore. Far too much had happened in the last half-year.

One way or another.

Whether I wanted to or not I.

I needed to get rid of Ogi Oshino.

No matter what kind of smile she wore I had to.

I glanced back at Shinobu. She looked back at me with silent gold eyes.

I once rejected Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's plea.

Help me, she begged, and I answered

I'm not helping you.

I couldn't be her answer.

And that'd be my response to Ogi, too.

"I understand, I won't help Ogi Oshino so." I summoned all my determination. "So please, Miss Gaen, tell me. Who is Ogi Oshino, the mysterious transfer student?"

"That kid's true identity is…"

An immediate reply. To the bitter end

Miss Gaen did know everything.

While I finally didn’t know a thing.

009

Tsukihi Araragi is an aberration.

The youngest daughter of the Araragis, she'll soon be entering her third year of middle school. The strategist of the Fire Sisters, a girl who often changes her hairstyle—and a phoenix.

To classify her with more specificity, to give an exact classification based not in zoology but cryptozoology, a lesser cuckoo, the Shidenotori.

Said to travel between the land of the living and the land of the dead, the cuckoo could be called a symbol of immortality—in fact, Tsukihi Araragi is more of an immortal aberration than even a vampire.

More immortal than a vampire, more resurrected than a zombie, more eternal than a ghost—she can't succumb to sickness, poison, or accident.

Also utterly free of special abilities that come with aberrationhood, she'd live a human life, its course running without her ever noticing a thing, before being reborn into her next life like it's nothing.

Reincarnated.

They say that phoenixes resurrect from within flames, but in that sense, she's as plain an aberration as one could be, having nothing to do with such spectacles. Yet Tsukihi is, undeniably, an aberration, which is why an expert onmyoji, a native Japanese sorcerer, visited our town in August, to eliminate her.

Yozuru Kagenui.

Yotsugi Ononoki.

I still don't know how exactly that pair specializing in immortal aberrations intended to "eliminate" my sister, an aberration that just won't die—but to skip to the conclusion, they decided to overlook her.

Though that's another bit she doesn't know of.

She lives on as an aberration.

As a human too.

As a member of our family, because they let her get away—let her go on being Koyomi Araragi's little sister.

They recognized her.

And being recognized—is the duty of any aberration.

And there we have her, as she is now.

It is why Tsukihi Araragi is here on March fourteenth.

"See ya later!" she said, leaving home first thing in the afternoon, but the last to leave that day, which was a kind of first: her parents, both employed, gone to work like always; her brother, done with his exams, out on his last date as a high schooler with his girlfriend since shortly after breakfast; and her older sister, too, off in high spirits to face a hundred opponents in a kumite. Both of her siblings had left without her knowledge, but Tsukihi Araragi's uninhibited nature didn't pay close attention to every little thing they did.

If anything, the Araragi sibling whose activities were the most puzzling, that posed the greatest cause for concern, was the youngest of the three—notoriously dangerous, you never knew what she might do left to her own devices.

On this day too, already enjoying spring break, the girl had informed her family that her plans were to visit her convalescing friend, but in truth, it wasn't an accurate description of her plans.

She was lying.

Deceiving her family, without feeling particularly guilty about it.

That said, the broad strokes didn't contradict reality, since she headed to the Sengoku residence just as she'd told her brother—the home of Nadeko Sengoku, her friend from elementary school.

Although they'd gone their separate ways in middle school, they were once close enough to call each other by nicknames—and now, by way of Tsukihi's brother, their relationship had been restored.

She'd worried about her friend, who'd been spirited away for a few months at the end of the previous year, and even after the hospital discharged her, visited her often—ostensibly (Tsukihi of course didn't know that Nadeko hadn't just gotten spirited away but in fact had become a holy spirit herself). But there was no need to check up on a girl who had made a full recovery, at least not three times a week.

Going to meet Nadeko wasn't a lie, but it wasn't to care for her—Tsukihi visited the Sengoku residence on White Day to help her friend at a certain activity.

And this activity?

"Thank you, Tsukihi. Thanks to you I think I'll be able to finish by my deadline," Nadeko Sengoku told her, to which she replied, "Oh, it's nothing at all," there in Nadeko's room on the second floor of her home.

Facing a reading desk, Tsukihi filled in a manga manuscript's blacks with ink. Her temperament was so touchy she tended to snap when spoken to while busy, but she remained serene now.

Perhaps not because being thanked put her in a good mood, but simply happy to see the change in her friend—not too long ago, Nadeko's line in this situation would surely have been I'm sorry, not Thank you.

That feeble attitude had irritated Tsukihi.

Enough to want to throw a punch had they not been friends, or even more so since they were, but after getting spirited back,

something about her childhood pal seemed a little different.

What could have happened?

Tsukihi Araragi did not ask this.

She did nothing so commonplace.

She focused only on the work before her—helping Nadeko Sengoku enter a manga manuscript for a newcomer's prize before its end-of-the-month deadline. In other words, acting as her assistant.

In the hospital room where Nadeko had stayed after getting spirited back, when Tsukihi was still checking on her health in earnest, she learned that her friend seemed to be interested in drawing manga.

She got mad at her friend for keeping it secret for so long—furious, in fact—but didn't mind at all when she was asked to go buy some supplies and help draw something.

One thing led to another, bringing us to this moment.

Nadeko Sengoku never expected Tsukihi Araragi, the strategist of the famed Fire Sisters who should have been quite busy in that capacity, to assist in manga-making so strenuously over such an extended period, and in that sense, might have felt like she'd gotten more than she bargained for.

Meanwhile, from Tsukihi's perspective, it was refreshing and fun to submit to the creative initiatives of Nadeko, who'd only cared for a lukewarm and cookie-cutter friendship until then.

Tsukihi had fun assisting Nadeko.

It wasn't as if checking up on her friend wasn't part of it, since Nadeko hadn't recovered to the point of returning to school (naturally, Tsukihi, head honcho of the area middle schoolers, knew of the troubles at her friend's Public MS 701). If the manga manuscript they now inked were any indication, however, she didn't need to worry.

Nadeko must have gotten over so much.

That was Tsukihi's impression.

Her friend's new hairstyle being one sign□before, which is to say ever since their time in elementary, Nadeko had tried to hide her face with grown-out bangs. More than just shy, or bashful, or even introverted, she'd seemed scared of people, but now she wore her hair extra-short.

She'd gone straight to a hairdresser after her hospital stay□the old her probably wouldn't have been able to at all. Nadeko Sengoku, who save for a lone instance had only ever gotten haircuts from her parents, stunned Tsukihi by asking for a rec.

Tsukihi had no reason to say no, in fact would get a referral bonus□but upon hearing the request (as she sat one seat over) for an extra-short haircut, even she worried that her friend had gone insane.

Well, Nadeko could make just about anything look good, so while her impression changed, it was hardly a disaster. Incomparably cuter, at least, than the time Tsukihi violently took to her bangs (said lone instance)□but then cuteness didn't seem to be what she was going for. She'd done it for the most logical of reasons: long hair got in the way of drawing manga.

Looking at her today, as she worked in her school track jacket that she didn't mind getting dirty with ink, she wasn't lying about the reason. Still, Tsukihi, picky about hairstyles, couldn't help but think that her friend's severed hair also spoke of a broken heart.

She only thought it, of course. She'd never say it, not even in her sleep. While Tsukihi's life philosophy was to come out and say anything and everything, she wasn't so insensitive.

"I don't really get this manga stuff."

This statement was just that, however.

"Nadeko, just how confident are you? Doesn't the winner get money or something?"

"Hmm, I don't know," her friend turned around and answered with

a troubled smile—even this would've been obscured by her hair in the past. "I stopped thinking about things like confidence."

"Huh."

"Someone told me I might have the talent—but these things don't always go well even if you're talented."

"You'll never become a first-rate creator if you don't believe in your own talent. Because you won't have anything to fall back on to support you, when you run out of effort."

People who only work hard break down when they can't work hard anymore, Tsukihi rambled on. This surely would've made Nadeko retreat in the past, but she was different now.

"You say believe, but it's more like being tricked," she caught the ball tossed her way. "Becoming a manga artist is like winning the lottery, to borrow your expression."

"I said that? Still, why not. There wouldn't be any money to pay out to the winner if no one played." It was dubious whether this addressed what was being said—probably not—but Nadeko smiled nonetheless.

"I'm just doing what I want to do. Even if I look uncool or embarrassing. Aren't you the same way?"

Nadeko turned the question around on Tsukihi, who was the one at a loss for words—because surprisingly enough, she wasn't doing what she wanted to do as much as others thought.

Once again, she was candid.

"I don't really have things I want to do, goals and that sort of stuff. Maybe that's why I like rooting for other people like this. Even the Fire Sisters were more a support group for middle schoolers than defenders of justice at first."

"Really?" Nadeko seemed to find this strange. A facet of her friend that she hadn't really seen halted her pen for a moment. "From my point of view, I don't know anyone whose stance on life is as clear-

cut as yours."

"Haha. I'm honored. Is it my birthday or something? Where are my candles, did they just melt away?" joked Tsukihi.

She used to refer to herself as Nadeko, she thought nostalgically. She vaguely remembered pointing this out to her friend, but when exactly had she made the leap to me?

"But I'm a little more nihilistic, or maybe self-destructive. I tend to let myself get dragged along by people who want to do something."

"Are you talking about Miss Karen…and Mister Koyomi?"

Nadeko had pronounced Mister Koyomi a little funny.

Funny. In an awkward manner.

But Tsukihi let it go.

Deciding that it was too soon to tease her.

"Yeah, I guess. And helping out with your job like this, I feel like I'm being dragged along by your motivation."

"Job…" Nadeko Sengoku blushed.

But of course she did. She was no machine, so even if she'd gotten over things, she hadn't ridden herself of all her bashfulness.

"It's not a job yet, though. Not even close," she said.

"Does someone like me have a future?" A weighty question, depending on the tone, here posed casually as Tsukihi's personality dictated. "I can do most things, but I almost don't want to do anything I can do. Doing something you can do is so boring! Since you can't leave it at that, I end up letting other people decide for me."

"But it's not like you don't want to do anything?" asked Nadeko, seeming to reference her past self and once again going deeper than she would have before.

“No. I want to do something. I want to be active, and proactive. That’s why I do something if it interests me in the slightest. But I also get bored of everything right away—it all gets tedious. I don’t really understand what kind of person I am. I don’t know, it might be fine while I’m a young thing, but once I’m an adult I’m going to get snagged by some loser guy who talks about his boring dreams and end up in an awful place.”

“What a realistic example…”

“I need to start thinking about my plans for the future, so that kind of thing won’t happen. Karen’s going to become a high schooler, and big brother’s going to start college. I feel like now, when I’m being left behind for the second time in two years, the last time being back in sixth grade, is when I should decide what to do and who to become.”

Like you, Nadeko, she added.

Just hearing you say that makes all my hard work feel worthwhile, Nadeko said and broke into a smile before going back to inking.

“I guess good things happen to people even if they can’t find happiness—just as long as they’re still alive.”

“Hm. Yeah, you might be right.”

Was she being consoled?

In the end, chatting thus, Tsukihi Araragi kept filling in blacks and even had dinner at her friend’s home. It was fully night by the time she decided on her next workday (having promised to help until the manuscript was finished) and left the Sengoku residence.

“A-ha, could it be Araragi-senpai’s little sister?”

Right after she left—as if to prey on her momentary uncertainty as to whether she should go straight home or take a detour, as if to blend into the dark of the night, and to slip through a crack in her mind, came this address.

From someone.

She looked over to find a high school-aged girl wearing the uniform of her brother's school and straddling a bicycle—eyes so glossily black you wondered for a moment if every streetlight in the vicinity had lost power.

A suspect smile plastered on her face.

A high school girl too young to be called bewitching but whose looks were anything but innocent, whose entire body seemed to exude an uncanny air.

In spite of her stylish bike, no one would ever term her healthy.

"We met yesterday, too. Hello."

"…Hello."

Had they?

Tsukihi wondered as she bobbed her head anyway. Her snap judgment was that she shouldn't be rude to an acquaintance of her brother's—and seeing this.

"My name's Ogi Oshino," the other girl introduced herself. "I hear about you all the time from your big brother—he says he's very proud of you. Gosh, I'm so jealous that you have a big bro like him."

"Uh huh…"

How were you to respond to such a greeting?

Also, her brother probably didn't say he was proud of her—Tsukihi Araragi was convinced that he wouldn't, even at gunpoint.

"It's late, I'll give you a ride. Hop on back," Ogi Oshino invited, pointing to the rear of her bike. Tsukihi was a bit surprised that anyone affable enough to casually offer to ride tandem with a stranger (or had they also met yesterday?) was friends with her brother.

The Sengoku and Araragi residences weren't so far away that a ride

was warranted, but nor was refusing such a gesture, once made—so thought Tsukihi, ready to accept it gratefully, until she noticed that the rear area Ogi pointed to had no seat.

BMX bikes seat only one.

“Don’t worry, I have pegs that let two people ride this,” assured Ogi. She got off for a moment and swiftly rigged her bike so that it seated two—swiftly, skillfully. “Okay, all ready. C’mon, hop on. Put your hands on my shoulders to get some balance.”

“I can balance myself without doing that.”

“Ha haa. Don’t be silly, how could you possibly—”

She could, though.

And she did.

Often overshadowed by the world-class core muscles of Karen, her sister a year older than her, Tsukihi’s physical condition was nothing to scoff at. Standing on the pegs attached to the rear wheel and stretching her arms out to the side (her too-long hair wrapped around them so it wouldn’t get caught in the wheels), she looked ready to guard Ogi’s six.

Okay, more like just stand there.

It was very much like her to take an already risky situation, riding two to a bicycle, and make it even more dangerous for no good reason—but if the pilot was worried by the circus stunt taking place behind her, she didn’t betray her alarm.

Tsukihi, herself, naturally enjoyed performing the trick, a believer in savoring fun to the fullest.

“My brother would love this bike!”

“Ah, right, he likes bicycles, now that you mention it—though it seems he lost both of his for certain reasons. Yes, you might say that’s why I’m riding one.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“No real meaning, more of a metaphor. Pay the right amount of attention to it, and maybe you’ll be rewarded.”

“Huh…”

“Was Sengoku doing well?” asked Ogi, apparently acquainted with not just her brother but Nadeko. Was she in the area to see how Nadeko was doing? Had Tsukihi cut in line somehow?

It was very much like her not to feel any kind of way about this.

Her moral code did include not cutting in line or skipping people’s turns on purpose, but feeling bad over doing so by accident required a self-critical bent that she didn’t possess.

“Maybe that’s where you’re different from your older brother.”

“Hm? What?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing. Anyway, Sengoku’s condition. How did her bill of health look? Clean? Or was it a death certificate?”

“…I guess she’s doing well.”

She’s doing great!

Tsukihi had nearly blurted that out, but her friend had yet to go back to school and needed an alibi.

A thoughtful girl, in that sense. Not just wise, but sly.

“She’s not dead. Actually, she was deader before.”

“Perhaps. Well, yes, no one’s ever just cute□the way I see it, girls like her are cuter when they’re not being cute,” Ogi remarked, not making much sense. This bit of banter must have seemed perfectly logical to her because she continued without going into detail. “Good, good,” she came to some understanding that was all her own. “So, for her, being a pretty girl was only ever self-harming□sad, no?”

“Sad? Aren’t you lucky if you’re cute?” questioned Tsukihi, innocently—maybe insensitively.

“Take how you don’t get to choose what family you’re born into. You might envy people born into class or wealth, but from their perspective, it’s also a heavy burden to carry since day one—for instance, they might not be allowed to become manga artists, even if that’s what they want. You’d call that unlucky, wouldn’t you?” explained Ogi, but Tsukihi—or rather, a fourteen-year-old girl didn’t seem to get it, and the older girl must have noticed. “It’s not what you can do that decides your future, but what you can’t do—because you won’t know where to focus if there’s too much you can do,” she shifted the topic a little. “Thanks to a lifetime’s worth of shame and other avenues getting cut off, Sengoku can now chase after her dream like mad—that’s what I’m saying.”

“…”

“Cuteness must have been a chain holding her down, but it was also too precious a talent to cut loose—so drastic measures were needed.”

“Drastic measures? What do you mean?”

“Who knows. Beats me.”

Ogi held out her hands. In other words, took them off the steering.

Both riders of a bike seating two had both of their hands free—they were reaching for the freedom to cause a traffic accident.

“I don’t know anything—it’s Araragi-senpai who knows.”

“…”

“But maybe it wasn’t about any drastic measure but learning from a bad example. Still, I feel bad for that conman…I didn’t mean for it to go that far. Your brother might not forgive me, even if I showed remorse.”

Ogi then put her hands back on the handlebars.

“It seems Sengoku wants to become a manga artist.”

She began pedaling faster.

“Tsukihi Araragi. How do you want to become?”

“How?” Recalling her conversion with Nadeko about this, Tsukihi replied, “I don’t have anything like that.” Her friend was keeping her manga-drawing pretty secret, but she must’ve told this person? “If I’m having fun, then I’m fine. Maybe that’ll keep going and be my future?”

“You might not know everything, but you can do everything. Omnipotent but not omniscient, you have too many choices, and your goals are scattered all over the place. That’s why you’re always content with the number-two spot. It’s easiest for you to be pulled forward by someone else□but when it comes to your future…” Ogi said, like she knew all about her□how much had her brother told her? “It’s just too grand and remote,” she divulged with a smirk.

“…? Are you saying I’m depending too much on other people?” She let slide the comment about her future since it was just confusing□but the stuff about being number two and whatnot piqued her interest, and she wanted to dig deeper. Maybe it was just a continuation of the conversation back in Nadeko’s room.

“I wonder. Considering how cuckoos lay their eggs in other birds’ nests, I’d say parasitism more than dependence… Despite that nature, your personality is also kind of unique. Could it be your big brother’s influence?”

“Cuckoos.”

“Tsukihi. It’s true that you’re living your life thanks to other people’s support□that they’re giving you life. You could’ve died during summer break if not for your siblings’ concern.”

“…? Summer break?”

What could she mean?

Another metaphor?

“So, people can’t live all on their own,” Tsukihi interpreted it in her own way and reworded it as a cliché, but

“People do live all on their own,” Ogi quickly contradicted her. “The ones who can’t are monsters.”

You and me for instance, Ogi Oshino appended it made no sense to Tsukihi Araragi.

At first, she’d found it unusual that her brother had a friend like this girl, but now that they’d talked, she was the type, her mysteriousness would click with him.

“Wait, huh? Hold on, Miss Oshino”

“Miss Ogi is fine.”

“Miss Ogi, we’re going in the wrong direction.”

Her odd position as she rode tandem on the bike had made the scenery look different or maybe not, maybe she’d just carelessly failed to notice until now, but at some point, they’d strayed far from the route between the Sengoku and Araragi residences.

It wasn’t so far that their conversation could last this long where were they now?

“Oops. Sorry, looks like I got lost why don’t I stop for a moment and look at a map on my phone.”

Ogi hardly sounded embarrassed as she looked for a good place to park and soon settled on a building and used her feet to brake in front of it.

The spot didn’t seem remotely ideal to Tsukihi the area was abandoned and untended, or maybe rundown was the better word. You only needed to glance at the building to tell that it was no longer in use. If her companion wasn’t a girl, Tsukihi might have worried that she’d been abducted by a wicked scoundrel claiming to be her brother’s friend (it’d be the scoundrel walking away the worse for wear in that case), but she felt no such danger as the girl fiddled with her smartphone. Instead, she looked up at the

abandoned building with curiosity.

It wasn't worth more than a glance. Nor was it a place you'd ever come to, unless you were lost—her curiosity sedimented as soon as she had the thought, proving just how much this girl lived in the moment.

"Hm? Hold on."

But then she remembered something.

For some reason, she remembered seeing the abandoned building—even though it had to be her first time here, and her first time seeing it.

"Oh, right… Isn't this the building that burned down back in—was it August?"

She'd seen it in the news.

As a member of the Fire Sisters who tasked herself with maintaining law and order in her town, she naturally came by such info—the case stuck out in her memory despite the many small fires breaking out at that time because it had been big enough to burn down an entire building.

Before it burned to the ground, and after it burned to the ground.

She had looked at both pictures.

When she learned the facts of the case, it seemed like nothing more than a spontaneous fire, nothing as dangerous as arson or the like—still, the damage must have been massive. Not even a single pillar could have been left behind.

So then, why was a building that had burned down standing there majestically? Had it been rebuilt? No, why bother recreating an abandoned building?

"I figured out the way, Tsukihi. Don't worry, I won't get it wrong this time. Or maybe you'd like to try driving? This BMX bike is pretty exciting, it can even go backwards—hm? Hmmm? What

seems to be the matter? Why are you looking up at such a plain, commonplace building?"

"Oh… It's just□"

Tsukihi explained. Ogi had only happened to get lost in the area and wouldn't have any answers as to why a building that should have burned down still existed. Tsukihi wanted to share her feelings nonetheless.

"Huh, how strange," commented Ogi. "I wonder if you could call this the ghost of a building. Why don't we try going inside?"

She was already chaining her bike to□and leaning it against (with no stand, the only option)□a nearby tree, and lost no time entering onto the grounds. She was so quick to act.

This girl was intrepid, unlike Tsukihi's brother, who overthought everything. Tsukihi wasn't the type to hesitate either, and rather than watch the girl walk off, followed right behind.

"Are you one of those abandoned building nerds, Miss Ogi?" she asked, inferring the possibility from the girl's light steps.

"No, ruins don't do much for me on their own. They scare me like they would any girl. But it's like my job to investigate suggestive places like these."

"Your job□you say." Echoing the word, Tsukihi recalled how it had made Nadeko self-conscious. Ogi couldn't be implying that it was some part-time gig, though.

"Yep."

With that, they stepped into the abandoned building. Technically speaking, this was trespassing, but the place was in such awful shape that it couldn't possibly have an owner or superintendent.

The footing couldn't be any worse, and no light could be expected given the time of day. They needed to be careful not to trip and fall, or else they could be seriously hurt.

“Looks like it used to be a school…er, a cram school,” Tsukihi concluded, after carefully observing its interior—and climbing the stairs, as the elevator was of course broken.

“Hm, you’re right. Bummer, by charging in head-first, we unveiled its true identity—and now that we know, it isn’t the least bit scary.” Ogi had never looked afraid but said this anyway as she turned the landing. Apparently, she wanted to begin her investigation with the top floor—the inverse of the theory that the most efficient way to look through drawers is to start with the bottom one. “That’s how it is, you know? Whatever you’re dealing with, the unidentified or unfamiliar is what’s scary. People get anxious when they think about their future because they can’t imagine their future selves. With a clear vision, you aren’t afraid of growth.”

“…”

“It’s like Schrödinger’s box. Open it, and it’s just a plain box—of course you can’t know if the cat in it is dead or alive when it’s closed. The same goes for mystery fiction. You bite your nails and your heart pounds because you don’t know who the culprit is. Once a mystery stops being a mystery and the list of suspects gets narrowed down to one—to be blunt, the book stops being interesting. Reveal scenes only need to be a line long, if you ask me.”

Once their true identity is exposed, both the fear and the interest vanish—that’s how it is, she summed up as she climbed, higher and higher.

Words of wisdom—her brother knew so many smart people. Despite this rare moment of honest respect, it was also Tsukihi Araragi’s karma to begin nitpicking whenever she felt respectful.

“Is that really true?”

“Hm…what now, a rebuttal? I’d like to hear it. For my sake, and for yours.”

“I wouldn’t say a rebuttal…but while it might be true for detective novels, in real life doesn’t it get scarier after the culprit is caught?

Once they are, you know for sure that the person you found so frightening actually exists."

"Hm."

"Learning their identity kicks off its own story… I mean, doesn't the process after catching a criminal take longer than catching them? There's the trial, then there's imprisonment…"

She'd gotten a bit off track, but Ogi seemed to find this opinion novel, as the garrulous girl held her tongue for a moment.

Tsukihi continued, "And even if you call it a true identity, there's no guarantee that it's really true. Who knows, another twist could be waiting for you, to put it in detective-fiction terms."

"You might be right about that. I see, so there are true identities and plain identities, which are only what they are. You got me there, I see you take after your brother."

I suppose that opinion was for your sake, and not mine, she remarked as she arrived at the top floor.

Having climbed four floors' worth of stairs, her breathing remained as calm as ever. The girl seemed to have good legs, but the same could be said of Tsukihi, who followed right behind.

She had health to spare vitality, too.

Such was Tsukihi Araragi.

"People might accept your true identity, Tsukihi or feel amused, but in my case I doubt it. My true identity is ugly."

"…?"

"Consider how we write that character: saké and demon. Not that the gods aren't just as fond of drowning in booze."

"The three strokes for 'water' in saké get left over when you combine the characters to form ugly, though."

“As they should. Signifying water or a lake. Or maybe a sea snake.”

This explanation only made things more confusing, and Tsukihi had to conclude that the girl had no interest in clarifying anything.

“Tsukihi,” Ogi called to her, heading for the leftmost of the floor’s three classrooms. “I’m afraid you have nothing you can call a future forget not knowing what’ll happen, you don’t have any at all. No matter how many moments you cobble together in the present, they’ll never add up to your future. All you have is an eternal present. Can you still keep living in the now, not worrying about what’s to come, never minding the future?”

“Yeah, probably,” Tsukihi answered in a most casual manner, quite unsure of what the question meant. “I’m pretty good at living, so yeah.”

“…It’s wonderful you can say that. I envy you.”

I envy you.

How was she supposed to respond to that, anyway? Ogi then put her hand on the door.

Turning its knob with grace.

She opened it with a smile.

“You’re late, Ogi.”

And I spoke. Inside the now-open classroom, I stood from the chair where I’d been sitting and imitated the man she’d called her uncle.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

010

“Sorry, Tsukihi, but could you go back home on your own? Take my bike—I need to talk to your big brother about something very important. The combination on the chain is 1234,” Ogi said, getting my sister to leave. The trivial combination seemed so her to me by this point.

We were now alone in the classroom.

I’d faced Oshino time and again in these ruins but never expected to be greeting someone in his position. Not to mention entering a burned-down abandoned cram school—a place you could also call the start of it all, which made putting an end to it all here almost too perfect.

Overdirected, even.

“Ogi. How did you create this abandoned building? The same way you recreated Year 1, Class 3 the first time we met?”

“No, the method is a little different—I had to put more into that. Meanwhile, this building just took the ability to generate matter. You know, like Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—Shinobu Oshino does so often.” Inspecting the tables lying around the classroom as she spoke, the germophobic girl selected a chair she deigned to sit in and dragged it up to me. “Not much care has been put into the details, so you can find rough edges all over the place, but it was a rush job. Please overlook them. Pray find warmth in the handmade feel of a papier-mâché structure… Ah, and speaking of Shinobu, what’s she up to? She should’ve regained her full powers, but she isn’t with you? Is she lurking in your shadow?”

“Not yet. Restoring our link—binding us to each other again is something we agreed to put off until it’s over.”

“Huh.” She sat down facing me, with her knees together and feet slightly apart. “Is that so—I was only asking if she’s here, but I see. So Shinobu wants to go right back to where she started. And you—after going to hell and back to exorcise yourself, not only stopping your transformation into a vampire but becoming fully human again—want to become a mockery of a human of a pathetic excuse of a vampire again. How masochistic.”

“What can I say. I love little girls,” I replied. Thinking how meaningless our conversation was.

“You’d throw your life away for a little girl—you may have exorcised your demons, but couldn’t do anything about the devil on your shoulder. Now, tell me, what will become of the young girl?”

“We make her into the god of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—but that’s also going to wait until it’s over.”

“Hm. Tying up every loose end into a nice little bow, I see. What to do with that shrine, that massive hole opened in this town, was a serious problem, but what a convenient solution.”

“A problem—in other words, it was part of your job?”

“I suppose… I told you something of the sort, didn’t I—but come on, why take every little thing so seriously?”

Ha haa, she laughed with cheer.

Her stance didn’t seem to change in particular even now—the same Ogi Oshino as ever, her approach to life consistent from the time I first met her in October.

“Regarding your job—my little sister…” Wondering how I might segue into the topic, I gingerly touched on Tsukihi, who’d just left the scene. “Did you two have a nice fun talk?”

“We were only in the middle of talking—don’t worry, I didn’t get far enough to lay any trap. I had to leave my job halfway done, how disappointing.”

“Was I wrong to interrupt?”

“You were right to. I was trying to do the right thing as well, but it ended as an attempt. In any case, it’d have been in vain. We exchanged a few words on the way, but she’s a tough one. As overwhelming as you’d expect an undying bird to be. I have to wonder, how did Yozuru Kagenui plan on ridding the world of something with that much vitality?”

“Don’t we get rid of monsters by revealing their true nature?”

“What I’m saying is that you can’t get rid of her even then, thanks to an older brother who knows her true nature and stubbornly loves her.”

“…”

“Hm. Maybe that’s why Yozuru Kagenui gave up on her though I can’t see it going the same way for me.”

“…”

“Am I wrong? You’ll expose my true nature here and get rid of me. That’s what’s going to happen, right?” She stared at me, appraising me with her dark black eyes despite her defeatist words. “All in all, I did get pretty far in fact, if failure was inevitable with Tsukihi, I left nothing undone even if it didn’t all go right. Maybe my existence wasn’t futile… Sorry, I hate to keep going back to this, but are you sure Shinobu Oshino isn’t here?”

“She isn’t.”

“With Yotsugi Ononoki already neutralized…I’ll skip over Mayoi Hachikuji if she hasn’t been deified yet…but Izuko Gaen, the lynch pin, isn’t here either?”

“Of course” was a strange way to put it, but in any case, it was just me there. That’s probably what Ogi wanted to make sure of. “Making this a one-on-one duel,” I assured, my words insincere.

“Well, isn’t that exciting.”

Ogi broke into a big smile I say so, but this was nothing new. She was always smiling.

I'd always thought of it as a show of composure, but for the first time I wondered if it brimmed with resignation.

Maybe, weary of the world and aware of its impermanence, hers was a poignant expression.

"What an honor it is to square off against the storied veteran Koyomi Araragi—my goodness. I was prepared to have Izuko Gaen get in my way, enchanted blade Kokorowatari in hand, in which case I'd have stood a chance of winning. I bet this is her secret to getting ahead in life, making her friends do the important stuff."

"I'm sure it's that too. But I think this is something I need to do myself. Something that only I can do, that I want to do alone."

"You want to, huh? Are you sure an adult didn't trick you into thinking that? Are you really working yourself to the bone for the sake of Shinobu and Hachikuji, or is it just inertia?" What a fool, mocked Ogi. "We tend to overvalue things that we nearly lost—but you'll never arrive at the future if you let nostalgia tie you down. Oh, by the way, I'm begging for my life here."

"…Begging for your life?"

"Don't you remember? I asked if you'd side with me. I asked you to save me—but I guess you callously rejected me. Maybe I wasn't charming enough."

She almost seemed to be having fun. Her amused air was kind of sad too now.

"It's the right choice, Araragi-senpai, right you are. Look at that, so you can do the right thing—though I wanted you to decline, unfortunately. Umm. Do you have any plans after this?"

"I told you. I'm putting Shinobu back in my shadow, and I'll watch over Hachikuji's apotheosis—there's a lot of other straightening-out to do, so I need to have a discussion with Miss Gaen."

"Oh. I was hoping we could go get food or something if you were free. Well, you seem quite busy, and I'm sure you don't want to be stuck here forever, so shall we bring things to an end?"

“Yeah, I think.”

I didn’t want to draw this out. That’d just be nasty. I needed to end her with one blow—with one word.

I couldn’t side with her. I couldn’t save her. If I could do her any favors, that was it.

“Ah, right, there’s something I wanted to say, Araragi-senpai. About your entrance exams… You feel you did pretty well, but the section for your best subject, math? Partway through, you skipped a bubble and started filling them in for the wrong questions.”

“What?!”

“After everything, you must’ve been flustered—my condolences. With an accident like that in your best subject, your odds are hopeless. Keep at it through next year,” Ogi said meanly.

She’d landed a punch. At the same time, I took her encouragement at face value.

Because next year—did exist for me.

“Ogi. You’re actually…”

I said it, thinking back to every last event since I’d encountered Ogi Oshino.

“You’re actually me.”

011

“That kid’s true identity is Koyomi Araragi.

“This might be too extraordinary a claim to accept, Koyomin, and I’ll of course explain in more detail. It’s not too complicated of a situation, really—though the explanation might get a little complex.

“It’s interlaced and entangled.

“I’ll need to go step by step to untie it all.

“Because in trying to reveal her true identity, she herself seems interlaced and entangled—messy and mixed like a jumble of cords. Just as you consist of many influences, it’d be a little careless to say that her true identity is Koyomi Araragi, end of story.

“The quickest and easiest interpretation, though, would be…Ogi Oshino is an aberration brought into being by Koyomi Araragi.

“Just like my sister, Toé Gaen, made up the aberration called the Rainy Devil—but when I say made up, I don’t mean it in the same way as making Yotsugi in college.

“If anything, it’s closer to the way Tsubasa Hanekawa made up Black Hanekawa and the Tyrannical Tiger—which is why I’d been a little concerned about that in August. I could see it happening to you, someone who looks up to Tsubasa as a sort of mentor.

“Well, let’s start with the precedent.

“With my older sister, even though it’s my family’s dirty laundry.

“I brought up the Rainy Devil without any explanation, but I’m sure you remember? The aberration that my sister’s daughter, Suruga Kanbaru, my niece, wished upon? The proper name of that Monkey’s Paw.

“Originally, though, it was neither a Monkey’s Paw nor a Rainy Devil. It was by giving the thing an ‘identity’ as the Rainy Devil that my sister managed to mummify an unidentified aberration she’d birthed on her own.

“Originally, it was a less comprehensible aberrational phenomenon.

“A compendium of mysterious events.

“To keep it brief—my sister often misplaced things. All sorts of objects somehow went missing around her—frequently enough that even the grade schooler that I was thought she was awfully careless for someone so harsh.

“But she noticed a trend.

“Although she seemed to be losing various random stuff, they had one thing in common—everything that disappeared was a recreational or luxury item.

“Games, books, snacks, pagers. Clothes that weren’t thrifty, bags on the expensive side, fashionable shoes. Simply put, items that weren’t necessary, but desired—or that interfered with getting things done.

“The kind that strict parents might take away from their kids—it didn’t take long for her to realize this. When she did, she also realized how these possessions were getting swallowed up into a black hole.

“They weren’t getting lost, but being thrown away. The culprit was none other than my sister herself.

“Her heart, ever strict on herself, made up a Darkness that disallowed anything that wasn’t right—or to be more accurate, something like the Darkness.

“She made it up to repress her adolescent, girlish feelings of wanting to play, fostered this aberration herself. I didn’t really understand as a grade schooler and was baffled that she was staging it all, but looking back on it now, it’s so typical of my strict older sister.

“An aberrational phenomenon of unknown origins, if you will.

“This unidentified aberration that Toé Gaen made up embodied her self-restraint—would be an unsatisfying ending, so we’ll go into what happened next. While she might’ve been confused until this point, once she realized its identity, it was in her wheelhouse: cracking down on her unruly self-restraint, her mercilessness extending even to her own stern nature, she vanquished the imitation Darkness.

“She ditched her uncontrollable repression.

“She settled the situation by tidying it up as a Western aberration, the Rainy Devil—brought the tale to an end by giving her dark side a crybaby demon name.

“And lived happily ever after.

“That was a quick summary, but the black hole was threatening to swallow up her friends and then-boyfriend, and it could’ve gotten pretty bad had she not taken care of it—if you’re interested, I can tell you the whole side story some other time.

“Passing down the mummified remains to her flesh-and-blood daughter like some family heirloom shows just how troublesome her personality was—but let’s put that aside.

“The simple view, Koyomin, is that the Rainy Devil was to my sister what Ogi Oshino is to you.

“If you want, Ogi Oshino is—Koyomi Araragi’s self-critical mindset.

“Don’t look so annoyed, I’m just telling the truth. Call me considerate for not saying self-negation.

“Doesn’t a lot fall in place if you think about it that way? She knew every last thing about your concerns, your circumstances, and your relationships. The things you’d forgotten, concealed, wanted never to think about again—she knew all of that.

“While insisting she didn’t know a thing.

“She knew everything about Koyomi Araragi.

“You’re the one who knows—you only needed to take those suggestive words literally.

“And because she knew those things, she criticized you for them. Your lies, your deceptions, your vagaries, your ambiguities, your fence-sitting, your irresponsibility—she kept reprimanding you for them, asking if you were really okay with it all.

“That’s what I mean by the real Darkness overlooking a convenient conclusion like Mayoi Hachikuji becoming a god, but not so the imitation Darkness. Your inability to accept a facile, forced solution to selfishly bringing Mayoi back from hell—your harshness on yourself would spur Ogi Oshino to act.

“Of course, like I said, she isn’t just your self-criticism—that’d never yield an adorable junior, as you describe her.

“Remember? She’s a mix.

“With a headache of a history.

“I’ll try to be solemn during this one part, because the nice lady speaking to you right now isn’t entirely free of blame.

“Wouldn’t you say?

“Apart from outliers like Tsubasa Hanekawa and my sister, high schoolers don’t give birth to aberrations every day.

“Just as Sengoku couldn’t give birth to Mister Serpent, you see.

“In fact, it took a tangle of fate, a number of characters and unavoidable occurrences, for Ogi Oshino to be born—if even a single element had been missing, your last half-year as a high schooler might’ve been a little more cheerful.

“When it comes down to it, though, these are seeds that you sowed—and they were sown last August.

“That case where you and I formed a common front—its

preliminaries.

“When Mayoi was attacked by the Darkness.

“Phase one was you ending up learning about the Darkness—a phenomenon that corrects mistakes.

“Bad is bad, wrong is wrong—an entity that judges for us in that way.

“Naturally, you couldn’t abide a phenomenon that tried to swallow up your beloved Hachikuji—but at the same time, your strong self-punitive streak was drawn to this Darkness, which could discipline you for all your deceit, starting with the defanging of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

“You can also look at it this way.

“If Mayoi Hachikuji is unpardonable—then how could I ever be pardoned?

“You wanted to be punished just as she was.

“If that was no good, then how is this good? If something’s bad, so’s everything else—wanting to condemn it all when just one detail is off, precisely because you yearn to protect everything you see.

“That feeling—was planted.

“Well, all of this is psychological.

“No matter how much you feel that way on the inside, not everyone is going to give birth to an aberration—but then, calling you an everyday high schooler would be a bit of a misnomer, Koyomin. You’re a mockery of a human who keeps the shadow of a legendary vampire in his own.

“Now, phase two followed soon after, of course. I mean your duel with the first Aberration Slayer, the legendary vampire’s first thrall. This is where I deserve the blame—Suruga.

“My niece got involved.

“During your first encounter with the First, he energy-drained Suruga’s left arm, the Rainy Devil, didn’t he?

“That absorbed the effect of the Monkey’s Paw—though he must have had an affinity for it to begin with, since the First was something like a synthesis of all the aberrations in this town.

“But imagine if the First took in not just the Rainy Devil, but the pure essence of that unidentified thing that my sister made—no, I’m not getting off topic.

“I get how you see the First as your rival, but you and he are connected through Heartunderblade—Shinobu Oshino.

“In fact, Shinobu went and ate him. A part of my sister’s estate made its way into you via Shinobu thanks to the food chain.

“A precedent—didn’t I say?

“That’s not all. If I’m the mainstay of the experts, he used to be the valve on the monster main. An ‘unidentified’ encompassing all the aberrational phenomena that occurred here along with their respective episodes was born as a result.

“Given her nature and origin, you’re right that Ogi Oshino isn’t a combat type—but she’d be quite adept at using, say, Heartunderblade’s ability to generate matter.

“A hybrid monster that can rouse up just about any aberrational phenomenon—no reason to be embarrassed if you couldn’t do a thing about her.

“Since she was born by way of the First, who was like the town’s aberration itself, she was a true monster when it came to knowledge—though it took her quite a while to make full use of her abilities thanks to them being just so extraordinary.

“By the way, Mayoi already brought up Ogi’s throwaway name and how it refers to being a Suruga Kanbaru fan, but we held off on her last name, Oshino, didn’t we—now’s the time to give you that explanation, Koyomin.

“Basically, it doesn’t come from Mèmè Oshino, but rather, Shinobu Oshino. Considering how you two are inseparable, Ogi Oshino is like a collaboration between you and Shinobu.

“It would’ve been simpler if she’d gone with Ogi Araragi, but yeah, she wasn’t going to be that transparent—as for claiming to be Mèmè’s niece, I probably set a bad example in August when I claimed to be his little sister.

“Sorry.

“I thought I’d try apologizing.

“This is a small detail, but she must’ve introduced herself as a Suruga Kanbaru fan—as her junior—thanks to the element relating to Suruga’s left arm.

“It was almost necessary.

“Suruga didn’t know anything, of course.

“No way she could have—she barely knows anything about her own mother. Better that she doesn’t—it’s what my sister wanted as well.

“That’s why I used a fake name and pretended to be Mèmè’s little sister. I wasn’t trying to play tricks on her, you know? It just ended up backfiring.

“No point in laboring over what’s done—well, I’d love to be so glib, but we haven’t actually gotten to anything special yet.

“Given how many times Shinobu showed off her matter-generation skill, it’d be ‘okay’ in a way if she’d tried to create an aberration or a high school girl.

“Compared to the examples I gave—Tsubasa Hanekawa’s Black Hanekawa and Tyrannical Tiger—the logic is easier to understand since it’s rooted in my sister’s aberration. Likewise, Suruga manifested her own unconscious with the same Rainy Devil’s left arm, and Nadeko Sengoku birthed a fantasy in herself, Mister Serpent, even if it didn’t reach the level of an aberration.

“You didn’t do anything that was especially weird. But uniquely, unlike those girls—uniquely like my sister—the aberration you created was an aberration that attacked yourself.

“It wasn’t self-centered.

“It was self-critical—to the point you could call it, in a sense, autotoxic.

“Regarding Sodachi Oikura’s case.

“Regarding Mayoi Hachikuji’s case.

“Regarding Nadeko Sengoku’s case.

“Regarding Hitagi Senjogahara’s case.

“Regarding Shinobu Oshino’s case.

“Regarding Yotsugi Ononoki’s case.

“Ogi Oshino blamed you tenaciously, dark rather than black—she kept on pushing you into a corner. Are you okay with that, can you forgive yourself, did you really solve it, isn’t that all smoke and mirrors—she kept whispering into your ear.

“Not as a monologue, but as a dialogue.

“Nestling up close.

“…Putting it that way makes it seem like your conscience was trying to regulate you, and almost sounds praiseworthy. It must have been the same for my sister, but frankly, you’re just going about your life making excuses to yourself. Bumbling around saving people, always offering aid as if you only existed to help others, hit a kind of limit and twisted your mind.

“That’s nothing praiseworthy.

“To be blunt, it’s a roundabout kind of self-harm.

“More than anything, you want to feel remorse, to be blamed. Ever

since spring break, some part of your mind, or more like your entire body, felt like you weren't playing fair.

"You ended up saving Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade out of compassion—and sought to be punished for it.

"You formed a friendship with Tsubasa Hanekawa—and questioned your right to, since you couldn't respond to her feelings in kind.

"You rescued Hitagi Senjogahara from her longstanding distress—and wondered if going on to date her was taking advantage of her debt.

"You respect Suruga Kanbaru—and develop a complex because you could never live as sincerely as she does.

"You saved Nadeko Sengoku—but it wasn't just her that you really wanted to save then.

"You reconciled, little by little, with Shinobu Oshino—but is that forgivable? Speaking of forgiveness, the First was granted it in August by Shinobu—so aren't you petty for not granting it to her yet? Aren't you hoping to be just forgiven too?

"You pretend not to regret choosing a little girl over your girlfriend and your savior that one time, but aren't you carrying that baggage around with you?

"To begin with, isn't it cheating to make free use of immortality? Shouldn't you be punished?

"Aren't I—as terrible as it gets?

"According to Mayoi, you were mumbling about this stuff even in hell—and Ogi Oshino is the full and unfiltered expression of the critical eye you cast on yourself, a sort of Dark Koyomin. That's why she attended to it all, one by one, almost dutifully, with Sodachi Oikura's case as a blueprint—as if she was the Darkness.

"Moreover, as a spirit who's distinct from you, she's had dealings with others too. She's been working hard to create an environment where you'd be barraged with criticism.

“Mèmè Oshino and Yozuru Kagenui.

“And probably Deishu Kaiki, after he cleaned up Nadeko Sengoku’s case.

“She shut them out of this town—because it goes without saying that their job as professionals got in the way of her own job.

“No, it wasn’t too difficult. No different from what I’ve been doing to this park—you put a barrier in place.

“If she then makes them lose their way, we can’t guide them to us—didn’t the First cause an aberrational phenomenon that made you lose your way? In which case Ogi Oshino, with roots close to his, could do the same.

“So don’t worry, Koyomin.

“Mèmè and Yozuru are probably fine.

“No guarantees about Kaiki, though, I don’t understand the exact process in his case… Anyway, it seems you’re concerned about them, but if they aren’t here, it’s only because you yourself refused the help of experts. While we might be in the dark about their whereabouts right now, once Ogi Oshino is defeated, we’ll have no trouble finding them.

“Hm? Oh. I’m able to be here because I’m an expert of a superior caliber—just kidding.

“I committed the ultimate rules infraction when it comes to aberrations.

“I chopped through the barrier with the enchanted blade Kokorowatari to make my way in, how else—I forged the blade so I could cut down any imitation Darkness that came into existence, but it ended up serving an unexpected use.

“In fact, I’m only here now because I forged the blade in time—boy, was it close.

“Just like I predicted? Oh, no. Even if you begat an imitation

Darkness, I thought it'd be a little smaller in scale—I guess I underestimated you in that sense.

"If I'd known, I'd have taken other measures, and sooner. We've been having to play defense instead.

"So many experts, against an amateur like you—take pride in that if you want.

"But only after we've eliminated Ogi Oshino.

"Your self-critical mindset is praiseworthy in certain situations, and maybe people could borrow a page from you—but not in a town without a god, no thanks, it's too destabilizing.

"Like I said yesterday, now that you're finished with your exams, I can't predict your moves at all—which means I can't predict what Ogi Oshino will do next, either.

"So we're setting a trap. A scheme to defeat her—to fence her in.

"Reading her next move while we still can, we'll lie in wait—I've already explained that part. If she's making a move, it'll be today.

"It'll be tonight.

"She, too, wants to avoid dealing with moves she can't predict—we should assume that her job's time limit is from now until they announce the test results, or until graduation.

"You get it, don't you?

"If she is Koyomi Araragi's self-critical mindset…if she surfaced as your guilt in face of the world, then she still has work to do.

"A job left undone.

"That's right. Tsukihi Araragi—your little sister.

"Your little sister, and not your little sister.

"An immortal aberration—the Shidenotori.

“She survives to this day, despite being Yozuru Kagenui and Yotsugi Ononoki’s target, because you shamelessly and irrationally protect her—she survives mimicking a human, and a part of you, Koyomi Araragi, has to be wondering if that’s fine.

“You don’t hesitate to protect your little sister.

“But it’s not as if you live by a clear philosophy that won’t blame yourself for being unhesitant.

“So I’m going to use your sister as a decoy.

“The plan is to apprehend Ogi Oshino in the act of trying to do harm to your little sister, and to reveal the perp’s true identity on the spot—to compare it to a mystery novel, as she loves to do, we have no evidence so we’re going to have to catch her red-handed.

“Yep.

“That’s right, no evidence—everything I said is nothing more than conjecture. It just bizarrely makes a mountain of sense. If you argued, ‘No, that’s impossible. I can’t believe that she’s me,’ then there’s nothing I could do to convince you otherwise.

“But you understand, right? You must know.

“Better than anyone—what she actually is. That’s why you have to be the one to expose her.

“It won’t work if it’s me.

“If I’d gone ahead with my initial plan and forced Shinobu to become a god, I probably wouldn’t enlist your help, but because you brought Mayoi back from hell with you, I can entrust you with ending this all and breathe easy.

“Breathe easy.

“Yes, I mean it—breathe easy.

“Koyomi Araragi, who’s so harsh on himself that his self-criticism and self-negation birthed an aberration, can obviously defeat

Koyomi Araragi, whom he hates so much.

“Win this battle against yourself.

“Easy, right? So far…

“For Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade’s sake, for Tsubasa Hanekawa’s sake, for Hitagi Senjogahara’s sake, for Mayoi Hachikuji’s sake, for Suruga Kanbaru’s sake, for Nadeko Sengoku’s sake, for Karen Araragi’s sake, for Tsukihi Araragi’s sake—going back to square one, for Sodachi Oikura’s sake, you’ve gone to the brink of death and come back numerous times.

“Sacrificing yourself. Killing your self.

“Killing it continuously—until you landed yourself in hell.

“Koyomi Araragi, so selfless and altruistic that there must be something wrong with his head—should find defeating Ogi Oshino, none other than himself, easier than taking candy from a baby, from himself.

“You, who have been tossing your life away like a piece of trash for other people’s sake, chucking any semblance of thought while you’re at it, just need to do your thing here. Kill yourself without a thought.

“Commit self-harm. Commit suicide.

“Kill yourself for the sake of others.

“It’s what you do every day.

“Nothing hard about it.

“Just kill yourself, show the spirit of self-sacrifice in your extreme but usual manner—what you’re facing is no high school girl or junior, certainly no savior’s niece, but yourself.

“So put an end to it.

“You end this, at your hand.

“That’s how your youth ends.”

012

“You’re actually me.”

You’re me.

Ogi Oshino□is Koyomi Araragi.

The moment I said it, rebuking her, it appeared.

I’d seen it before□but really, that’s not the right word. Nothing more than a shade, a hole that sucked everything into itself, a lone, pitch black, darkness□nothing but darkness.

The Darkness.

Nothing was there.

A nihility, an absence.

So black, though, I couldn’t call it emptiness.

Overwriting, blotting out the world’s typos□a black, black blackness.

Black black.

Black□engulfing black.

“Well, that was fast. The main attraction, already on stage? Were the lies that serious, the crimes so grave?”

In contrast to my stunned state as I flashed back to my previous dramatic escape from it, Ogi was coolness itself□even smirking.

I knew this’d happen, of course. I’d been told.

If I exposed Ogi Oshino's true identity—which is to say, my own deceit, the Darkness would appear and swallow her up, according to Miss Gaen's plan.

I thought I was emotionally prepared, but the Darkness that I was facing once again had appeared with such astonishing abruptness.

"To think that I tried to play the part of this—I wasn't in my right mind, if I do say so myself. I imagined I was hewing to stricter standards than the real thing, but…not even close. It wasn't even a decent impression. I suppose being more unyielding than the world's rules, and dubbing myself the cosmic law, was unreasonable to begin with? I did hope to be dark matter."

I couldn't afford to take my eyes off the Darkness, which had entered the classroom with an impact that threw perspective out of the window, but Ogi had no problem looking away and faced me as she spoke.

Her composure seemed to imply—a critique of my own weakness, even now.

"Don't worry, I won't run or hide. I do love mystery novels, after all. Nothing more shameless than a culprit who doesn't know the score—in fact, I'm one of those old-fashioned readers who want it to end with the criminal's suicide."

"…"

"Oh, but cool and collected doesn't cut it either. It's a buzzkill in its own way, it just pisses me off, when they're calm even as they're confronted with the truth. Given that I'm about to disappear, I'm trembling on the inside. Annihilation, matter and anti-matter colliding. I'm trying to put up a bold front because you're watching, but I have to wonder, what's that like? Does it at least beat getting sent to hell?"

Ha haa, she laughed.

I was halfway out of my chair, but she showed no sign of standing up from hers.

“Suicide…” I began, my voice actually trembling. “But you knew this’d happen, didn’t you? If you’re me—that I’d be waiting here, having realized your true identity. So then why did you come? You could’ve dropped your criticism of Tsukihi’s case and run away.”

“Run away, like where? I just do what I need to do, even if it’s pointless—remember? I’d leave some unfinished business behind, but no regrets. In that sense, it really is suicide,” Ogi said with a beaming smile. “Sometimes you have to fight even if it’s a losing battle. While we may never agree on anything, if you’ll allow me something like my final words, I think I straightened your life out, in my own way. In a good way—though life might be going too far when I only spent a brief six months correcting a brief six months’ worth of deeds. How about youth? Even if I didn’t make yours any better, didn’t I make it more just?”

“If this is what you call just, then I don’t need my life to be just. Do you have any idea how much trouble you’ve caused?”

I’d resolved not to blame her—she’d done it all because of me—but the words slipped out of my mouth. I was being critical toward my self-criticism.

With the all-engulfing Darkness next to us, with nonexistence existing right there. With less than a minute left to exchange words with her.

“For Senjogahara, for Kanbaru, for Sengoku, for Hanekawa, for Shinobu, for Oshino, for Miss Kagenui, for Ononoki…for Kaiki—do you know how much trouble you’ve caused them? Do you have any idea just how much harm you’ve spread?”

“If they did suffer harm, it was nothing more than comeuppance,” answered Ogi. “I didn’t do anything—don’t you know that yourself? Trouble, harm, misfortune, they aren’t something you can come to terms with so easily. Even less so difficultly.”

“But you can, if it’s justice? You can neatly pack up what’s right and wrong?”

“Impossible—which is exactly why I worked with you, as a team.

Even if you can't determine what's right, can't you still decide which side is right?"

"…"

"Regarding Sodachi Oikura's case, I was wrong. Regarding Nadeko Sengoku's, I was right. Tadatsuru Teori's was maybe a dissatisfying draw□I knew he and Izuko Gaen were connected, believed a one-on-one match was winnable. Nor did the kind of rift I wanted between you and Yotsugi Ononoki ever materialize."

A match. That's how Ogi described it.

Okay… Then our face-off had begun as soon as we'd met□was every one of our conversations, and not just the three rounds she mentioned, a kind of duel?

A duel to test□not what's right, but which side is right.

That's what rightness meant to her…and maybe it was closer to justice than righting wrongs□however.

"What was the record in the end, then? Which of us ended up being right?"

"Since I'm about to be annihilated like this, I'd say you. Congratulations." With this, Ogi finally stood up from her chair. "What you've been doing wasn't wrong."

It was right.

Her saying so hardly made me feel any better. It was more like a fistful of salt in my wounds.

It was Ononoki who'd hit me where it hurt with her remark that I was seeking forgiveness by forgoing happiness. Since I was so pitiful, I ought to be beyond reproach□if that stance gave rise to Ogi, who'd unleashed so much fury, it put me deep in the wrong.

But maybe fury isn't correct□or right, when she'd been trying to pacify our town.

Just like Miss Gaen, in that they both sought to install a god at Kita-Shirahebi. Ogi's point of view was expansive, as if in reprimand of my inability to see past the end of my nose.

If she'd been righting my wrongs all this time, I needed to be thanking her—but I couldn't.

Even if this was goodbye, an eternal parting.

I couldn't allow myself to thank her—Koyomi Araragi and Ogi Oshino could only exist in opposition, critical of each other. We could only affirm our own existence by denying the other's.

And that existence would soon vanish. Go away—in atonement.

The imitation Darkness swallowed up by the Darkness.

"The end of youth, we might say. Or maybe of a tale. Well, nothing serious. It's not your life ending here, and nowhere near the end of the world. One of your many stories concludes, and it's not even the finale. I'm glad I could disappear before you graduated, great work," Ogi snuck in a mystifying bit—and dipped her head down in a bow. "Bye, Araragi-senpai."

"Bye, Ogi."

And now.

Ogi Oshino, who came on as Suruga Kanbaru's junior, threw my life into as much chaos as possible since second term, pulled strings behind the curtains all throughout town, crawled between the lines to dig up everything foreshadowed there, rehashed what had come to an end, demanded self-understanding and atonement, self-flagellation and silence, feared no opposition, flinched at no hostility, allowed nothing to slide with her sneering, unforgiving attitude, and forgave nobody.

Ogi Oshino, who appeared wherever I went, like my shadow—everywhere.

Her crime of self-falsification tried, her true identity exposed, like the many deceptions she herself had punished, Ogi Oshino, whom I

could see anytime, would be swallowed up by the true Darkness, which virtually didn't exist, as though she never existed—leaving behind neither shape nor shadow, she'd vanish.

Her rightness and my wrongness.

My wrongness and her rightness—annihilating each other.

Done and gone, ceasing to exist.

All that she'd been up to was about to end.

So I'd say it again—I'd never allow words of gratitude to come out of my mouth, but I could at least see myself off with a recitation of my farewell.

Bye, Ogi.

Goodbye, my youth…

"Nope, no can do!"

I leapt.

Forcing my human body that dared not budge, using the strength in my human legs to stand from my chair, I put my mass to work like a human and ran like a human—in other words, as a plain human.

I leapt at Ogi and shoved her to the floor.

As if to dodge the Darkness, which was only inches away, I shoved a high school girl down on the cracked floor of an abandoned building. I wasn't even sure if the Darkness had been moving, but it did pass over my head.

I—saved Ogi Oshino.

"A-Araragi-senpai?! Wh-What…"

For the first time.

For the first time now—Ogi let out what sounded like a panicked voice. No, thinking back, maybe this was the first time ever that I'd

seen her truly shaken.

“What are you thinking?!”

Okay, maybe she was just angry.

But I couldn’t respond to her anger—to her criticism. Not because I didn’t know how to put my feelings into words.

I couldn’t speak because I was in pain.

“…gh.”

As if to dodge the Darkness, I’d said, but I hadn’t actually—it had grazed my right arm.

A graze was all it needed to take the whole thing: my upper arm down was gone like it had never existed.

The bleeding wouldn’t stop.

Naturally, it didn’t regenerate.

I was nothing but human now.

The degree of pain probably wasn’t too different from back when I was slightly vampiric, and I should’ve been used to it, in terms of tolerance—but the sense of loss was something else.

“Trying to save people when you aren’t even immortal…” Ogi’s indignation continued unabated. Still on the floor, she glared at me with her black eyes. “I-Is that who you are in the end? You throw your life away for others on a whim? You’d even save someone who only ever criticized you, who only ever attacked you? Why die here, what good will it do? Why save me here—you’re wrong, after all. There’s something wrong with you as a person. You’re scum—”

“I wasn’t trying to…” Despite everything growing hazy due to the blood loss, her rough dressing-down helped me hold on, and I replied haltingly, “…save people. I saved myself just now.”

Miss Gaen had misjudged this one. The lady who knew everything

was, how else to put it—wrong.

Hard on myself and hard on others? That wasn't me.

Self-sacrificing, self-critical, self-flagellating.

I, who couldn't stop throwing my life away for other people—self-centered for once.

Egotistically.

Saved myself.

Not caring what people wanted or how I looked, selfishly true to desire, to instinct—I saved myself.

Showing my true colors.

Self-staged, was what this was. Nothing more…

I'm hardly praiseworthy or great, and since I was such a weakling, if I didn't save myself—

I was going to die, wasn't I?

"Hitagi…" I said deliriously. "Hanekawa…Shinobu…Ononoki… saved me… They all saved me, so how can I not? How's that okay…"

"…"

Silently.

The ever-talkative girl silently and gently touched my wound—and the bleeding stopped. Using some aberration's power that she'd inherited, whether from Seishiro Shishirui or Toé Gaen I don't know, but anyway she stopped my bleeding.

Maybe this was pointless.

As pointless as shielding Ogi's body—we'd survived the initial strike, but now that I couldn't move, the Darkness might just swallow me up as well.

None of my muscles was responding to my will. Even if I reconsidered and chose to be strong and unforgiving, it'd be too late to abandon Ogi and run away—and I liked that it was too late. Getting swallowed up along with someone who'd worked so diligently on my behalf seemed like the least I could do.

"My goodness, Araragi-senpai. I was planning on offing myself, and now it's a double suicide. You do realize that I'm not a little girl?"

"Fine by me… You're still like a six-month-old…baby…aren't you."

According to Miss Gaen, defeating Ogi was easier than taking candy from a baby.

But you don't take candy from babies, you're supposed to protect them, like I was doing.

"If everything I've done so far wasn't some mistake, then I bet this isn't a mistake, either," I said. "I'm not doing things wrong."

Yes. Just as you're not.

Maybe it was because the bleeding had stopped—my words were miraculously clear. When Ogi heard them, that smile returned to her face.

No. This was another first.

It was a smile she'd never shown until now. A bit bashful, and somehow embarrassed, smile.

"You really are—such a fool."

"Not really."

Then.

I heard an unbelievable voice. Not mine or Ogi's, but a third

party's—when I looked in its direction, which is to say at the door Ogi had opened to enter the classroom, I again couldn't believe who was standing there.

I thought Tsukihi had returned at first, but it was no one like my little sister, a middle-school girl who was adorable at least in appearance—a Hawaiian shirt.

A middle-aged dude in a Hawaiian shirt.

"It's nothing to sneeze at. You finally fought for yourself—I respect you, Araragi."

Easily, an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

Mèmè Oshino—uttered those words.

"…!"

I thought I was hallucinating, that on the verge of death, I was seeing the phantom of a man who couldn't be present. Yet under me, Ogi was looking in the same direction with a shocked expression, so it couldn't be a convenient delusion.

Well.

If Ogi and I were the same person, then surely, pushed to the limit, we could hallucinate the same thing—and witness a convenient mirage, like a party of travelers seeking out a desert oasis.

From behind the middle-aged delinquent, however, wobbled another figure, like a newborn fawn—or rather a dying fawn, with trembling legs. Spotting this second individual, I realized it was no convenient delusion or mirage but simply the result of honest effort.

Effort.

On the part of a girl with mottled hair who looked ready to fall flat on her pale face at any moment, bags carved so deep under her eyes that I could see them at my distance, her layers of clothes in utter disarray, just drained and depleted and dead on her feet in general—Tsubasa Hanekawa's outlandish effort.

“Ten all-nighters in a row was pushing it…”

She nevertheless wrung out her last bit of energy to force a victorious smile and point a provocative finger at Ogi, who lay under me.

“I win.”

With that, Hanekawa collapsed.

So dramatically I thought she might’ve died—but she’d only fallen asleep.

“I don’t believe it. Miss Hanekawa really brought him…from Antarctica. How did she even get there and back?” Ogi muttered in a feeble whisper I could barely make out—hm? Antarctica?

Antarctica, a frozen land that even an exceptional aberration at her full strength, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, could not tolerate and evacuated—a place absolutely devoid of aberrations.

In other words, a place absolutely no expert would visit.

Is that what she meant by…a reverse approach? We’d only searched places where Oshino might go, but should have tried places where he wouldn’t, instead? Hiding a tree not in a forest but on the ocean floor—was legitimate. Yes, but it was human psychology to look for it in a forest. Who’d go dredge the ocean, other than Hanekawa…

I was speechless—she hadn’t said a paid man, Hitagi.

Depaysement.

So Hanekawa’s two possible locations had been Antarctica and its opposite, the North Pole… Beautifully winning that coin toss, she had tracked down Mèmè Oshino and, moreover, made it back to Japan with a day to spare.

“Her head’s messed up.”

This probably wasn’t referring to the jumbled speckles of white and black—but Ogi Oshino admitting defeat to Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Come to think of it, Ogi had been wary of her from the start, which made total sense, since I knew better than anyone how incredible Hanekawa is. If Dark Koyomin was an answer to Black Hanekawa, no wonder they didn't get along.

Miss Gaen and Hachikuji's read on the name Ogi was that it played on fan—it seemed forced, and I realized belatedly that it wasn't just forced but tacked-on, a bit of misdirection to put it in mystery novel terms. Wasn't the point that you obtained Ogi by adding the character for portal on top of the feather in Hanekawa's name?

All that wariness, all the countermeasures did have an effect but could only buy time and got breached, futile in the final analysis—Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Just how Tsubasa Hanekawa was she?

"Araragi," Mèmè Oshino said with a grin, not so much as glancing at Hanekawa, who'd collapsed right next to him. "In an abandoned place like this… What's the idea, shoving my cute li'l niece down to the floor—so spirited, Araragi. Something good happen to you? You're acting awfully suspicious with a junior when you have a girlfriend."

What a ridiculous thing to say, look at the situation we're in, I nearly shot back as I always used to in this classroom, but before I could—it was gone.

Not Ogi's form. The Darkness.

The law of nature that seemed ready to engulf us at any moment vanished entirely—the existence, or nonexistence, we could neither see nor feel in the first place.

The Nothingness was no more.

"Ah…"

Niece? He just said that. About Ogi.

Mèmè Oshino said that.

In other words, he recognized her as a relative—meaning her actual existence.

Her presence was no longer a lie or fake.

Hence—the Darkness disappeared.

"…"

Ogi could say nothing, dumbstruck.

Even Ogi Oshino, who acted like she saw through everything, must not have imagined being saved like this, not by someone whose return she thought she'd resisted by putting up a barrier, to keep her true identity under wraps.

But that's the kind of guy Mèmè Oshino is.

The original and progenitor—when it comes to acting like he sees through everything.

"You saved us there…Oshino," I thanked on behalf of the speechless Ogi—though speaking for her simply meant saying what I felt.

"It's not like I saved you. You just went and got saved on your own."

Well done.

When I heard those words.

I reached my breaking point and crumpled, no longer able to support my own weight—and Ogi, who had to bear all of it, groaned. Geh—the moan sounded real, with nothing cute about it, and perhaps proved her existence. She had substance.

Became real the moment her true identity was exposed.

Ogi Oshino became Ogi Oshino.

So ended my, Koyomi Araragi's, youth—a period when not caring for myself meant loving others, and even sacrificing myself to save

someone made sense—that weak thin inebriation, that sweet deception came to an end.

But it was only the beginning of my bitter, gruesome, and evenly pitched battle against Ogi.

Neither brightly affirming myself, nor blindly negating myself.

I'd not stop thinking, and not be afraid to act; I'd not hesitate to try again, no matter how frustrating, scrutinizing my constant trials and errors, experiencing remorse and regret as if to split every hair, but taking on yet greater challenges and gambles; recouping every loss with three times the gains—an endless battle in pursuit of happiness, hereby begun in earnest.

013

The epilogue.

The following day, March fifteenth. The morning of my graduation ceremony.

Roused from bed by my little sisters Karen and Tsukihi as usual, I began walking to school for the last time—or rode my bike. Turning the pedals, yes sir, this feeling. It was the BMX Ogi had lent Tsukihi. Of course, I had to return the bike and could only use it today, but the comfort of riding one after so long was like a rich, ripe reward for making it to the future called today, to graduation.

If you're curious, when I saw Tsukihi in the morning, she'd forgotten about the reappearance of a cram school that should've burned down. Are you serious, I wondered, just how bad is your memory, but to be more precise, she seemed to have filed it away as "one of those mysterious things that happen in life."

I guess my littler little sister's days were more colored by trouble than I thought—maybe she couldn't be bothered about every low-risk event, and I was genuinely worried that starting next school year, she and Karen would be split between middle and high schools.

Despite my sweet dreams of finding my own lodgings in college, even of cohabiting with Hitagi, I couldn't leave home right away when I thought about my little sister.

What's more, her case, the phoenix, wasn't really solved.

And I doubted Hitagi would want to leave her father anyway—not to mention, all of this needed to wait until my exam results were out. In fact, if Ogi's talk about my answer sheet being a question off was true, leaving for college was a pipe dream. I could even see

myself diving straight into a job hunt.

Then again, my parents might just kick me out of the house if I'd failed.

"By the way, Tsukihi, what was your wish? You know, with that hair?"

She'd started growing it out at some point, not that I was one to talk, so I brought it up as I was heading out.

A loose end that hadn't been tied up.

I'd heard a while back that she was growing it out as part of some kind of wish but realized she never told me what the wish was. If she was still growing it out, it must not have come true yet.

"Oh, right. I guess I can cut it already—I forgot I'd been making a wish to begin with."

"Now I really want to know just how bad your memory is."

"I actually made wishes about you getting into college, and about Nadeko—call it a pray-hair to the gods."

If they exist, I mean, qualified Tsukihi.

What? I had a sneaking suspicion it had to do with me, but Sengoku, too? As her older brother, I seriously needed to learn from her example when it came to friendship.

"Your exams are over one way or another, and Nadeko's doing better—yeah. Maybe there is a god."

"Yeah. Since yesterday."

"Hm?"

"It's nothing."

"Okay," Tsukihi said, easily convinced.

I was dropping a hint, did she just not care? How grand for a petite

girl.

“Maybe I’ll get a matching haircut with Nadeko once you find out you passed. Since the Fire Sisters are disbanding, maybe I’ll team up with her next… And you, aren’t you going to cut your hair?”

“Well, you know,” I answered vaguely□touching the fang marks etched deep into the back of my neck, around my nape.

So the fate of her long grown-out hair depended on my test results□but I wasn’t going to think about that today. Today was graduation.

I’d honestly considered dropping out at one point, but I’d made it. Right now, that alone was enough to fill my bosom.

…Oh, and I’d talked to Karen in the morning too.

Siblings talking a lot is a good thing.

“Big Brother, Big Brother. I can’t canoodle with you after next month since I’ll be a high schooler, so let’s feed each other mouth-to-mouth one last time!”

“…”

I worried about this little sister too. Was she punch-drunk from her hundred-person sparring?

I’d never asked her if she beat all of them. I didn’t want to be any more scared of her than I already was.

“Then afterwards, we can brush each other’s teeth!”

“No, brush up on how people with brains act… Um, listen, Karen. Are you planning on fighting for justice even in high school□even after Tsuganoki Second’s Fire Sisters disband?”

“Say no more!” she assured me, sticking out her noticeably larger breasts□I guess her chest was just as full as mine? Though I believe the expression she wanted was needless to say, not say no more…

If she cared, that is.

“Karen. In that case, pause to reflect here and try to sum up your three middle-school years. What did righteousness mean to you in the end?”

“Hrrm?”

“Righteousness. Justice. What is it?”

Doing the right thing? Righting wrongs? Perhaps deciding which side is right?

I tossed a question thrown my way by Ogi straight over to my little sister—cast it to the next generation.

I saw the Fire Sisters’ justice as poetic justice, the defeating of bad guys, but wondered what they saw themselves as performing—and how she planned to proceed.

“Helping people.”

Making no attempt to understand my question, Karen responded reflexively—a straightforward and easy-to-understand answer, hard to argue with, but just as hard to carry out. That was her answer.

“Oh,” I said.

I climbed on a nearby chair, reached out my hand, and patted her head (can’t reach without climbing one).

A submissive gesture for vampires, all it signified here was affection for my awful little sister.

“Well, why don’t you start by helping yourself?”

You better.

That’s how our conversation went—but whatever happened, my bigger little sister’s high school life probably wouldn’t suck like mine.

May Karen Araragi continue to be unbroken by righteousness…

So I happily creaked along, pedaling an unfamiliar bicycle, when a figure stood before me that I recognized at once—a pigtailed fifth grader wearing a large backpack.

Had I come up on her from behind, I might have spent another five pages pretending to hesitate, like a true virtuoso, before going to embrace her, but sadly she was facing me and walking in my direction.

Even I couldn't tackle that.

"Hey, Hachikuji," I called out to her like a normal person.

"Please don't speak to me," she said with a visible frown. "I'm a god now."

It went to her head! And she was back where she started!

"If you have to speak to me, bow twice, clap twice, bow one more time, then present me with an offering like you're supposed to for a god."

To begin with, Hachikuji didn't look any different even if she was a god—she wasn't wearing the garb of a shrine maiden or any traditional attire.

Maybe in the future, but I guess aberrations, like humans, don't change overnight. Only gradually.

"So why's a god wandering around town? Don't tell me you're lost."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm on the side of saving the lost now, unironically at that."

"Who's being ridiculous? I gotta admit though, it's quite a promotion…"

"I'm taken aback that you'd call this wandering around. Observing the lowly creatures of the world below is one of the more trivial duties of a god."

“This god stuff has really gotten to your head. Don’t change so much overnight. Gradual change, I was saying.”

“Is your commencement ceremony being held today, Mister Araragi? I’d like to congratulate you on all your hard work,” Hachikuji lauded me at last and bowed her head. “I’d love to attend and help you celebrate, but my divine presence could disturb the unwashed masses, so I abstain out of consideration.”

“You know, no one’s coming to worship at your shrine. This town is going to end up godless again.”

“Ha ha ha. Don’t say that. Come by whenever you’d like. All are free to worship at Kita-Shirahebi, do come over to play anytime.”

“Sure. I’ll come over to play at your house.”

“Yes, to my house,” Hachikuji said and walked off in the direction I came from she wasn’t kidding as far as the bit about observing our town.

“…”

I saw her off.

Well, she wasn’t the type to sit quietly at home. Interacting with her took me back but also seemed normal.

It was a normal that had required no small effort.

In any case, Miss Gaen’s terribly reckless plan to deify Mayoi Hachikuji seemed to have worked out in the end honestly, I’d had my doubts about such a forced solution, but you might say that’s what the big boss of the experts was capable of.

“Capable? You mean you, Koyomin, because I sure didn’t expect it to end this way. Please, I’m begging you, don’t go around spreading stupid rumors that I was envisioning an ending this slapdash from the start,” she’d told me the previous night.

Did she have to go that far?

“Seriously, I haven’t been this shocked since I mentioned Nostradamus’ prophecy just to pander to a kid and was told, ‘I wasn’t born yet in 1999’—guess I’m getting up there.”

“I’m not seeing your point.”

“There’s no particular point. Just that we’re living in a future that didn’t end then.”

“Okay…but Miss Gaen. A lot of the credit for getting to our slapdash ending should go to Hanekawa.” I mean, if not for her, wouldn’t Ogi and I have died in a double suicide? Nothing interesting about that end.

“Right, she does deserve my thanks for finding that amateurish junior of mine—I can only raise a white flag to her. What’s really amazing isn’t that she found him, but that she found him and brought him back.”

“…Because she broke through the barrier? But it wouldn’t affect Hanekawa, who’s a resident of this town—the Lost Cow can’t make you lose your way if you want to go home.”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Miss Gaen brushed my lay opinion aside with a shake of her head. “She managed to make him feel like it.”

“…”

“As far as I know, Mèmè Oshino isn’t the type to make a ‘Special Cameo Appearance’—and when I say as far as I know, it’s a fact… By the way, are you sure about this, Miss Shinobu?” she asked the golden-haired, golden-eyed babe (and not little girl) standing next to me. “If I’m being honest with you, your decision pleases me, as an expert, but your desire to be sealed in Koyomin’s shadow again is one I have trouble understanding. If you have some kind of aim here, I’d like you to make it clear.”

“I harbor none—is tiring of battle and wishing to be regarded once more as harmless so mystifying to an expert? I think not. Kakak!”

From little girl to bewitching woman. She now wanted to go back

to being a little girl. Our link hadn't been restored yet, but as she answered with her gruesome smile, I could tell she wasn't lying.

"If my master, who fast removed all traces of vampirism from his form, doth protest against becoming a mockery of a human and of a vampire, I defer to his wishes of course—having healed his arm, I shall retreat to a mountain mayhap to live as a recluse."

"Like I'd ever let you," I spoke up before Miss Gaen could. "You know there aren't any Mister Donut branches in the mountains."

"True."

After this exchange—and naturally, after I vowed not to err and become a vampire again by offering excessive blood libations, or rather donations, my link to Shinobu was fixed for a third time. Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, who hadn't enjoyed her full form since spring break, was sealed off in my shadow once more as Shinobu Oshino, a harmless eight-year-old kid.

During spring break, there was no choice—but this time was different.

Of her own will.

She sealed away her existence—and wasn't lying or faking it. She, who'd rejected godhood four hundred years ago, chose to be a little girl, four hundred years later.

Well, maybe there was no choice. At least, I didn't have any future that involved not living alongside Shinobu.

Not that we'd forgiven each other, needless to say—a time to forgive, and to forget, might come after four hundred years; for now, that's where our relationship stood, whether you call it collusion or caprice, custom or compromise.

"If you want to die tomorrow, I'm ready for my life to end tomorrow—if you care to live for today, then so will I."

"If ye were to die the day after tomorrow, I shall live until the day after that—to speak of thee to another. I shall speak, and they shall

listen to the tale of my master.”

I arrived at school.

I passed through the gates decorated for graduation and headed toward the bike racks—to find Tsubasa Hanekawa waiting there.

Maybe model students were exemplary in terms of stamina too. Outwardly, at least, she’d made a complete recovery from last night’s state of exhaustion—even the bags under her eyes had vanished. I was impressed.

“Good morning, Araragi.”

“Good morning, Hanekawa—so you made it to graduation. I thought you’d be dead all of today.” Was tough even the right word? Who knew, maybe she was the most immortal of us all. “And you’re in the bike lot because…”

“I was waiting for you, of course—there’s a lot I want to talk to you about.”

“Yeah?”

“I need to leave as soon as the ceremony is over, so I thought this would be the only time we could really talk.”

“…”

What an active girl. If she was going to say that, I needed to talk to her too—about a mountain of things. Or rather, I wanted to compare answers with her.

“Do you have a plane to catch? Is that why you’re leaving so soon?”

“Mm. Mmm. Well,” Hanekawa demurred somewhat. She ran her fingers through her hair, now significantly longer since she cut it during first term—it wasn’t speckled, of course, because she dyed it black for school. “In bringing Mister Oshino back from Antarctica, I kind of sold off my brain.”

“You sold your brain…”

What the heck—that didn't sound safe, at all.

"Jet-setting, I guess you'd say?" she went on. "That's about the only way I could charter a fighter plane—don't worry. I sold it to a relatively scrupulous agency."

"…"

What kind of international adventure had she gone on, exactly?

But no surprise that she was outsized in the real world too.

It felt quite strange in the first place for her to be at school in a uniform—though this would be my last time seeing her in her school uniform.

I felt like I should ogle her when I thought about it that way.

Ogle, ogle.

"Don't make me knock you down."

"Yikes."

Was it overseas, too, where she acquired this level of defense?

If she'd learned how to fight, she was perfect at this point.

"Speaking of fighting," I said, "Miss Kagenui seems to be at the North Pole. It took Miss Gaen all of five minutes to find out after she learned Oshino's location."

"Oh—I decided to go with the continental choice out of a vague hunch, but I guess I wouldn't have been wrong if I'd chosen the North Pole," remarked Hanekawa, the tension seeming to leave her shoulders—that part really must have been a gamble.

If you were separating Oshino and Miss Kagenui, though, she had to be the one at the North Pole—she couldn't walk on the ground, after all. Ogi had no choice but to send her there where it was all icebergs and no ground.

“Ononoki wanted to go get her, but apparently Miss Kagenui is having a blast fighting polar bears, a training method I’ve heard of somewhere, and is fine for now,” I told Hanekawa.

“What an incredible lady… I’m glad I didn’t end up going there. Wait, then what about Ononoki? What’s she doing now? Has she left our town, like Miss Gaen and Mister Oshino?”

I shook my head at the question. “She’s still at my house.”

“That’s…”

Hanekawa had a subtle look on her face.

And I couldn’t blame her.

I did realize that Ononoki’s prediction that Miss Kagenui had gone off on a journey to better herself, while still wrong, wasn’t too far off the mark. Maybe she’d come closest to the truth.

I hate admitting that.

“I guess it’s more like Miss Gaen and Oshino left too suddenly—adults are always so busy,” I said.

All too soon.

The way Miss Gaen took off with an “Alrighty, bye-bye” after installing Hachikuji as the god of Kita-Shirahebi and sealing Shinobu back into my shadow was one thing, but before I knew, Oshino had left without a word yet again—as if to disappear along with the ruins Ogi had created.

Truly like some mirage, he flat-out, flatly vanished.

Without the time to so much as reminisce before parting anew—but we’d been reunited after he’d gone all the way out to the South Pole, so I knew we’d meet again in the not-too-distant future.

Still, scramming before I could even thank him for everything, including the Tadatsuru business, was pretty unforgivable.

And in this way—whatever way this is—I gained custody of Ononoki for the time being, pending the conclusion of Miss Kagenui's training. Assuming Miss Gaen hadn't just forgotten the familiar, maybe it meant continued surveillance.

I'm not complaining. I did mess up.

Personally, I felt like I'd cleaned things up, but not everyone out there would agree.

Least of all, her—myself.

"Adults… Aren't we also going to be adults starting tomorrow?" asked Hanekawa.

"Hitagi and I will still be students. You're the only one becoming an adult."

"Hitagi?" I thought I'd dished out a snappy line but had only slipped up, and Hanekawa latched onto my misstep gleefully. "Huh, I see. I see—while I was gone."

"Wait, wait, wait. Don't jump to any conclusions. It hasn't gone as far as you might be imagining."

"Good, good—I can leave with my mind at ease," Hanekawa said and started walking.

She'd wanted to talk to me before she left Japan again—was that it? She really cared about her friends…or just worried too much.

You could say she'd singlehandedly solved everything this time—indeed, everything since August. Forget about due credit, maybe it was all hers.

Exactly a year ago.

If I hadn't met Hanekawa then, what would my last year of high school have been like? I couldn't help but get sentimental.

Not making friends.

Because it'd lower my intensity as a human□leaving those words behind, I might've graduated alone, in silence (or failed to).

It might've been fine in its own way. But now, I could only picture this way.

"Oh…right."

"Hm? What's the matter, Araragi?"

"Well, I know it's a little late to bring it up, but I noticed something… The reason Miss Gaen was so sure Ogi would make a move on Tsukihi on March fourteenth."

Ogi had said it herself, too. She wanted to put an end to it before I graduated, the point, her read, being: before my youth ended.

While still in high school.

As much as Ogi needed an opening in my schedule, she also needed Tsukihi to show an opening…but my littler little sister is full of them. Surviving without doing a thing really makes her a phoenix.

As I headed to my classroom alongside Hanekawa□we ran into Hitagi Senjogahara by the building entrance. Catching sight of the two of us together, she grimaced for a second□no doubt because Hanekawa had managed to ambush me first.

Please, no odd battle between friends…so damn uncomfortable.

Sure, Hitagi had a stubborn complex when it came to her, but given how Hanekawa had soared to a height that neither of us could reach, curbing those feelings little by little would only be wise…

Not that I was one to talk□in spite of singing her praises, somewhere inside of me I too saw her as a rival in that I'd given birth to Ogi Oshino, who couldn't stand her.

"Good morning, Araragi."

"Oh? You don't call him Koyomi?" Hanekawa asked before I could reply. She'd gotten a little meaner after being knocked around by

the world.

Maybe Hitagi thought resistance was futile. “Good morning, Koyomi,” she corrected herself, cheeks mildly aflush. “And welcome back, Tsubasa.”

While she was at it, she also first-named Hanekawa—who looked surprised but returned, like the genius she was, “Glad to be home, Hitagi-chan.”

Hitagi-chan…sounded so cute.

Probably because they’d be talking taking girl-to-girl in due course, Hanekawa didn’t get into how she’d be leaving soon after the ceremony, and the three of us walked to our classroom.

The school’s atmosphere felt different too—but that just had to be me.

“Koyomi. It seems like Kanbaru got us a graduation present.”

“Oh, yeah? A present from Kanbaru? I’m worried.”

“She wouldn’t prepare a weird surprise for something like this, not even her. I did ask in so many words, and it seems to be a regular bouquet of flowers.”

“Flowers, huh.”

Hitagi was worried too if she bothered to ask—meanwhile, not putting any questions to me, as we conversed, was very much like her. No attempts to ferret out whatever happened last night or how we cleaned things up.

She waited for me to tell her.

It wouldn’t put me in a flattering light, it wasn’t anything I was eager to volunteer—but she needed to hear about everything.

I hoped it would come across as a funny story.

I hoped I could tell it to her with a smile.

“By the way, Araragi,” Hanekawa said. “How many points short of a perfect score were you on your exams?”

“…”

Who asked such a question?

She meant it as a joke, of course.

I told her I seemed to have filled in the wrong bubbles by one question for math—and Hanekawa was pensive for a moment.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “I contacted Miss…someone who took the same college’s math exam and already asked about the kinds of test questions you had. This wasn’t the kind of answer sheet where you could lose your place.”

She was way too proactive. Just how concerned was she about me, anyway?

But…not that kind of answer sheet?

True, I’d wondered how I could be off by one question when there hadn’t been that many, but why would Ogi…

I’d assumed it was true since she said it.

“That is so Ogi’s way of being mean,” commented Hitagi. “I could never imagine you pranking anyone like that.”

Was that right? No, she said it precisely because I never would—I’d burdened her with doing what I couldn’t and wouldn’t do.

All this time until now, and probably going forward.

I was reminded of Kanbaru, who’d gotten us flowers—Suruga Kanbaru, a distant, underlying cause of Ogi Oshino’s birth, who had no direct knowledge of the Darkness but, compared to me, had far more of what it took to exert self-control.

Above all, a direct descendant of Toé Gaen—in some form, a disposition that gave birth to aberrations must have been passed

down their lineage.

Which meant Kanbaru, too, might experience being in the throes of her youth.

Her own Ogi Oshino could appear before her—would I be able to support her when that happened?

Just as Hanekawa had done for me?

…Well, I'd just have to do my best.

I'm only me, after all.

Not just as Oshino, nor just as Hanekawa, but just as me, I'd lend my support.

So that someone could go and get saved on her own.

I thought these things like I'd come to a great understanding as I finished climbing the stairs, and just then, it happened.

I crossed paths with a girl—a student who descended the stairs without looking our way. A first-year, judging by the color of her scarf. She had to be here for our graduation ceremony, but why was a first-year in the third-year area?

The girl looked so pale, however, that it quashed any such questions—and her wobbling, unsteady gait got me worried about her mental state as much as her physical condition.

She looked drained.

Possessed.

At that notion—I stopped.

Hitagi and Hanekawa turned back to look at me and shrugged in resignation. Their movements synchronized, the best of friends.

"Go ahead."

They spoke in unison as well.

“Yeah. Could you pick up my diploma for me?”

See you, I said, handing my bag to Hitagi and leaping down the whole set of stairs I’d just climbed in pursuit of the first-year student. With the eyes of the two girls watching me off at my back, I hit the landing, pivoted, and rushed down another set of stairs.

Searching where the girl might have gone, I ran through the first-year halls, past another student who had pitch-black eyes.

Like darkness itself, she sneered.

And said, “You never change, do you, Araragi-senpai.”

No.

I do.

But no matter how much I change, I’m going to be me.

“Long, long ago, in a distant land, was an odd fellow named Koyomi Araragi aye, and is still.”

Happily ever after, my shadow recited, running alongside me.

If the story continued, I couldn’t wait to hear what happened next.

Afterword

So, people talk about mistakes you can't live down, but when you really think about it, what sort of fail can you live down? If you lose something or suffer a defeat, it's not as if some later accomplishment cancels it out—still, while a fail might never go away no matter how much regret or remorse you feel, it certainly seems possible to forget about it. In other words, a mistake you can live down implies a win big enough that lets you forget that earlier mistake, doesn't it? In success stories where a miserable past serves as a springboard, misery is by no means fueling happiness, but rather, perhaps, accumulating enough of a future lets the past be forgotten; conversely, you can accumulate enough misery to ruin a happy present, so actually I don't see much of a causal relationship between happiness and misery. Like, they aren't antonyms or anything. This is getting complicated, so to lay it out—or just to split hairs about success and failure, happiness and misery, as I see fit—it's not all a matter of mindset but instead simply a question of memory. That's to say, the most powerful ability we have as humans might be forgetting. Of course, as Koyomi Araragi, Hitagi Senjogahara, and Tsubasa Hanekawa proved over the course of a year in this story, or ten years in my reckoning, I think the ability shouldn't be spammed.

And so, this has been End Tale part three, the de facto final installment of the Final Season of the MONOGATARI series. Looking back, "Hitagi Crab" was published in the Shosetsu Gendai supplement Mephisto's September 2005 issue—supposedly as a self-contained short story, but it's 2014 now and I'm still writing, so more than incredible, it's a plain shock. I imagine some folks have been reading along for ten years, while others read them all just yesterday, but it's thanks to all of you that I've been able to pen the Monster, Wound, Fake, Cat Black/White, Dandy, Flower, Decoy, Demon, Love, Possession, Calendar, and End Tales to finish the series. After this, we'll cutely publish End Tale (Cont.), an encore

final installment of the Final Season, and wrap it up for real. Yes, cutely. And so, this has been OWARIMONOGATARI Part 03, “Chapter Five: Mayoi Hell,” “Chapter Six: Hitagi Rendezvous,” and “Chapter Seven: Ogi Dark.”

The cover depicts Senjogahara with braids inside a planetarium.* It’s fantastic. My thanks go out to VOFAN. Whatever I may forget, I’d never forget my gratitude as I continue to work my hardest.

Thank you very much for reading.

* Editor’s Note: The art that has been included as an insert for this translation. In the previous paragraph, references to the original “seventeen volume” partitioning were omitted to reflect the larger count of the North American release which also kicked off with Wound rather than Monster and rolled out over half the time.

NISIOISIN

OWARIMONOGATARI, Part 3

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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